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SAINTE-BEUVE  
A LITERARY PORTRAIT

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AUTHOR OF  
VICTOR HUGO, THE MAN AND THE POET  
(The Dial Press)

AND OF  
THE MISANTHROPE OF MOLIÈRE  
(done into English verse)  
(Houghton Mifflin Co.)

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# I

## THE MAN

He was a man, take him for all in all,  
I shall not look upon his like again.

—*Shakespeare*

The real eminence of Sainte-Beuve as a critic was, during the last years of his life, fully recognized. It had required nearly half a century of heroic labor to attain this recognition. Sainte-Beuve, as a man, has not even at this late date received full justice. Is it because, himself a critic, he has fallen a prey to the critics who have taken his place—or who have aspired to do so? In their personal references to him they are nearly always cool rather than cordial; they are often almost hostile. They do not do homage to him as to a cherished master; they magnify his human weaknesses, and they pay a tribute of neglectful silence to his virtues. It has at times almost seemed as if he survived less as the immortal author of the *Lundis* than as the lover of Madame Hugo and the author of the “*Livre d'Amour*.” In part this is no doubt due to the fact that Sainte-Beuve himself set the example of this negligence. He did nothing more to lay the foundations of his posthumous reputation than to publish some fifty volumes of criticism. He did not, like most of his contemporaries, prepare the way for secular canonization by creating and propagating a *légende*. On the contrary, he exposed his faults and hid his virtues. It is therefore a duty, mainly unperformed by his biographers, after dilating on the former to uncover also the latter.

Youth is the most pleasing period in the lives of most writers. It was ungracious toward Sainte-Beuve. It veiled the finer sides of his nature behind the least attractive ones. The waywardness of the novice in life, the over-stimulated senses, the unscrupulous and tortuous homage paid to love,

and the precocious maturity which analyzes all these things with cynical knowingness, conspire in him to disenchant us. And the whole record is laid bare. He has concealed nothing. He can only gain as he goes on by the emergence of the virtues which abolished some, and balanced, or only veiled, others of these unlovely traits. The growing dominance of the intelligence, and of that half of wisdom which is its fruitage, makes the mature Sainte-Beuve, the intellectual athlete manfully plying his Titanic task, a far more engaging figure than the youthful poet and lover; so much so that in rehearsing the more auspicious period of his life that followed, it seems only fair to forget his youth—even what so indecorously survived of it.

It is, indeed, only just to view him through his work rather than in the biographic data written into its margin. His personality, seen apart from his work, has a drab coloring. The young man who fights a duel with an umbrella in one hand and a pistol in the other, willing to be killed but not willing to be drenched, makes a somewhat prosaic hero of romance; and so does the prudent quadragenarian who is more willing to fall in love than to run the risks of matrimony, or the absent-minded senator who forgets his skull-cap in the rostrum so that the next speaker abstractedly uses it to wipe the sweat of oratoric battle from his reeking brow. But to fancy that this bourgeois is the whole Sainte-Beuve, or even a very important part of him, is an error. It is to see the war-horse in the stable instead of on the battlefield. Sainte-Beuve, pen in hand and playing the critic, is at all times very different from the disconsolate elegist of the early years or from the disillusioned epicurean of the later ones.

He enters the sacred precincts of literature as a gentleman enters a salon, with the intention of pleasing and of being pleased, of finding and of imparting charm. And he has the magic talisman; he has the fine good-nature that gilds everything he touches, that accompanies and enhances his words like a smile; he has, to use one of his favorite expressions, *le rayon*. This drab bourgeois turns out to be, in



his work, one of the great gentlemen of letters, one of the great enchanters, who offers us at the same time the most entertaining converse for our lightest moods and the most substantial diet for our serious ones. This implies an unusual capacity for seeing oneself in relation to others, for keeping the perspective true, a thing impossible without a considerable measure of genuine humility. Sainte-Beuve is not a lettered Brahmin, an exalted dilettante, loving books and despising those who do not; he is one of those "who approach letters from the standpoint of morals and of the feelings that are dearest to mankind." That is the basis of the genuinely popular and democratic element in him. He is bourgeois also in this: he identifies himself with society and with his own times, he is proud of being a Frenchman and a heritor of French traditions. He has nothing of the snobbish disdain of the artist for the average man, nothing of his demand for the extraordinary and the exciting. He has, on the contrary, a warm sympathy for the middle class to which he belongs, and he believes it a little sounder than those above or below it; he sees in it a sort of dumb depositary of progress.

"The bourgeois," as M. Veuillot describes him, "is heavy, Bœotian, inconsistent; but he is not so absurd as he is painted. . . There is a certain progress of civilization, a certain residue of enlightenment (laugh if you will), which has filtered down to him, and which renders him very endurable in spite of some laughable sides. . . In a word, there are diffused through the mass of society certain general results of remote origin, the product of several centuries of reasoning, of analysis, of emancipated good sense, and of religious morality secularized, the outcome of positive discoveries in astronomy, physics, etc. All this is decanted slowly, insensibly, into the most lethargic brains; it is not much clarified or elaborated, but it is a real and fixed possession. This somewhat bourgeois compound shocks you; I call it, from a moral standpoint, an accomplished fact. Observe all this for yourself and draw your deductions. I do not ask you, the cultivated class, to follow, without

taking its measure, this great current; I do not say that you may not oppose it, even run counter to it at certain points, especially where it has gathered into one of those cascades which we call revolutions; but, in its totality, you will not reverse its course.”<sup>1</sup>

Sainte-Beuve belonged in taste and temper to the old order of things, to a society that prized and sought what was exquisite and distinguished, what was the very reverse of our modern democratic commonness. But the submerging tide was already seen to be invincible in his day, and he makes some uneasy efforts to accommodate himself to it even in the things of culture, of art, of literature: he refuses to despair of the future of democracy; he clings to the hope, which cruel experience had not yet so utterly gained, that the *délicatesse* without which there is no literature, or art, or culture, might be in some measure universalized. It was not quite so evident three-quarters of a century ago that civilization is a fragile conspiracy carried on by a very few—in great part for the benefit of the many—but very quietly and surreptitiously, lest they turn and rend its guiding spirits.

“For my part,” says Sainte-Beuve, “I have not so bad an idea of the public taken in the mass, on condition that they be put on the right track. ‘How many fools does it take to make a public?’ asked an ironic wit. I am persuaded that he was in the wrong and that what he said was piquant but false. A public is never composed of fools, but of people of good sense, prudent, hesitant, scattered, who usually need to be rallied, to have their own opinion disengaged for them, and to have clearly pointed out to them what they think. This is true of every public, great or small, even of a fairly select public.”<sup>2</sup>

Sainte-Beuve is here flattering the great public at the expense of the small. Good sense and prudence, no doubt, either public learns in the harsh school of experience. Good-will they both inherit at the hands of nature. But good taste? Refinement? Critical sense? These require half a

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<sup>1</sup> NL 1-77.

<sup>2</sup> CL 1-45.



life-time of initiation. It is a very genuine humanitarian kindness, a slight excess of popular spirit, that inclines Sainte-Beuve to this optimistic confidence—for the moment—in the capacity of the people. The really significant point here is that he is not a reactionary; he is a man of his time, ready to accommodate himself to the changed perspective of the modern world; he recognizes that the saving remnant cannot thrive apart but must contrive to secure a little toleration, and when possible even a little complicity, from those who form the more numerous and grosser portion of the public. He holds it foolishness indeed to reject the time one lives in and to sulk in a corner.

*Tu ne cede malis, sed contra audentior ito.*

That, he feels, is the only justifiable and virile attitude, and, thus viewed, his work is a prolonged and insinuating course in rhetoric, in Atticism, in decorum, in tradition, addressed to that half unheeding, half unwilling pupil, Demos. He does not overlook the fact that he is likely, as are most of those who undertake this thankless task, to fall in his tracks. He entertains no facile hopes; for that he is at once too well informed and too sagacious. He recognizes that the warfare between the old order and the new is a deadly one; that Atticism, and all that is for him implied in this term, "taste, politeness, culture, civilization," are on trial. Most modern peoples have never possessed them in their highest form; France may lose them. "We are in danger," he says, "of becoming in our manners as rude in many respects as the English or the Americans . . . An increasing vulgarity, an immense vulgarity, which seems in the distance like a swelling sea—that is the great modern peril." Such agencies as journalism, the theatre, the church, the university, seem to him either ineffective or already won over to the wrong side. As for literature, he finds it in his day "on the highroad to corruption; it is decadent." It has no longer any hold on tradition, any centre; there is a painful lack of harmony and of truth even in the finest works of the age. His final hope seems to lie in that indefinite

something which is the background of tradition itself, in that perhaps indestructible gift of the gods, *l'esprit français*.

"In order to awaken in these newcomers the respect for letters and for ennobling studies, we cannot too much emphasize how serious these are, how essential to human nature and to its development, how bound up with all that is useful in history and in politics, how consonant with true moral knowledge and experience. There are wanted, in a word, ideas and language, which I do not undertake to find, which others are perhaps engaged in finding, but which would have to effect the most difficult thing in the world: the creating anew of a lofty need, the awakening of a desire."

"We must," he says not unwisely, "address ourselves frankly to the new and painful task; we must adapt ourselves henceforward to the many, extract from the good sense of the multitude the best that it holds, and what is most applicable to noble subjects; we must popularize what is beautiful, must seem even to lower these things a little in order to lift up to them the common level. It is only thus that we can show ourselves wholly and intelligently worthy of them, for this is the only means of preserving them. We must in some degree initiate everybody, so as to place them under the universal protection."<sup>3</sup>

Had he lived into this more disillusioned age, he might have added that, however slight the general result, however disappointing, only in this way can a democratic society beget, though half unwittingly and half unwillingly, the little élite that will furnish it with light and the leaders that will give it guidance.

Sainte-Beuve does not, either from satiric impulse or from deficient sympathy, seek a ridiculous side in the humbler classes. Though a poet of the 1830 group of romanticists, he never rhymed to shock the bourgeois; though a critic in the 1860 group of scientific and realistic writers, he did not in the name of taste mock at the bourgeois.

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<sup>3</sup> CL 1-293.

Whenever a statue is erected on the boulevards or a bust in the Luxembourg Gardens, some captious critic is sure to complain that the Parisian bourgeois, affecting taste and elegance, is covering France with ugly statues or is desecrating nature with hideous deathsheds. Sainte-Beuve, whose own bust now smiles quizzically at the passer out of the greenery of the Luxembourg, is less disdainful. A bust of the Abbé Prévost is erected in the Abbé's native town. Sainte-Beuve pictures the people of the rural communes flocking to the ceremony, their mill-wheels turning in air, the houses, the cattle and the children left in charge of a few home-staying elders, while the municipal administrators, the aldermen, and the magistrates, the whole *race du bon pays artois*, convene to pay honor to one whose genius has done so much honor to them.<sup>4</sup> Imagine the Flaubert of the *comices agricoles* or the Goncourts of the "Journal" describing such a scene! What a stream of acrid irony and mocking malevolence it would provoke! Sainte-Beuve does not divide men into classes and castes, into elect and reprobate. His distinctions rest on sound and logical bases; his taste is not squeamishly uncharitable but is of a healthy catholicity, open to the appeal of popular feeling as well as of literary refinements.

This popular vein in Sainte-Beuve is at the centre of his decidedly nationalistic and patriotic attitude. In this he is nowise of the family of Montaigne or Goethe. He reverses the cosmopolitan maxim and feels that *ubi patria ibi bene*—except after a revolution. A citizen of the world intellectually, he remains very French at heart. He refers to Frederick's derogatory judgments of Voltaire, but he adds that it is not for a French pen to record them. The same motive imparts a tone of severity to his own judgments of Voltaire: "He pitilessly ridicules us in writing to a foreign sovereign [Catherine II]; he makes France the victim of a *charivari* in the eyes of Russia; he is bent on showing that 'the French are the prime monkeys of the universe,' and he proves it by his own gambols."<sup>5</sup> Few writers have ever kept

<sup>4</sup> CL 9-124.

<sup>5</sup> NL 2-225.



their country's honor more respectfully in mind than has Sainte-Beuve through all his work. He refuses to share the enthusiasm of certain biographers of Mazarin, because the great Cardinal with all his perspicacity had failed in one point to prove himself French in tone, in feeling, or in understanding: he failed to comprehend that powerful inspiration which monarchic France found in the ideal of *honor*.<sup>6</sup>

Sainte-Beuve's curiosity is of a comparatively home-staying order. His subjects are nearly always French. He has a great fondness for history, but it is for French history. Other history is only illustrative and incidental; the transatlantic world is singularly absent from his consciousness. His real habitat is the French past and the French present. He is clear-eyed enough to see the darker sides of the record, and he is too fond of the truth to dissimulate them in his pictures; but he always turns with visible delight to the more glorious pages of the past. He has nothing of the romantic prejudice against Richelieu, whom he loves to extol, or against Louis XIV, whose approaches toward greatness he loves to magnify. Napoleon's epic thrills him like a greater Iliad. It is interesting to note the interplay here of enthusiasm and judgment. He cannot but see certain fundamental flaws in the great hero, an ultimate lack of rationality and of morality. That is the tribute to sane judgment that a mind so eminently sane could not but pay. But how ardently, on the other hand, he admires Napoleon's genius, and how he tends to identify it with the genius of France! There is almost a strain of Béranger in Sainte-Beuve. He reviews with poignant regret the series of mischances that converted Waterloo from a victory into a disaster. He enters with all the sympathy of the man of the people into the pathos and the suffering of Napoleon in exile, and shows himself truly French in his hatred for Sir Hudson Lowe. This is not the hollow mood of certain of the romanticists, who were often seduced by the stagey splendors of the theme rather than by any profoundly patriotic emotion. It was not from the aesthetic side, as a first-class subject for di-

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<sup>6</sup> CL 2-256.

thyrambic emotions, that Napoleon appealed to Sainte-Beuve. It was the great captain, the leader, the incomparable organizer and builder of modern France, the brilliant representative of its spirit, that he admired in him; it was for his splendid achievements that he worshipped Napoleon's greatness—and almost accepted his conduct. In all Sainte-Beuve's work the pages most vibrant with a continuous groundswell of emotion are those he devoted to the First Empire; they constitute a veritable course in patriotism. Under the effort to maintain the impartiality which the severe Muse of history demands and to speak as a judge, we catch the audible protest of the patriot exclaiming: After all, I am a Frenchman! Patriotism, like literature, is a religion for him, and as such is superior to reason itself. When in 1840 the French discussed the question of fortifying Paris so that, even though all else were lost, it might still be flung as a last desperate stake into the hazards of war, Sainte-Beuve feels that such a chance, slender and perilous as it may be, is still to be grasped at: "However much one may concede to considerations of general civilization, of human reason and of philosophy, there are moments when the thought of honor prevails over all else; when, however humane a man may be, however enlightened he may suppose himself, it is fitting to be one of the people, to feel like the people, if we wish to remain a nation. And that settles the question."<sup>7</sup>

That Sainte-Beuve, in spite of his scepticism and his keen-sighted realism, preserved this capacity for patriotic fervor along with his unabating sympathy for the religious spirit, his respectful homage toward morality, and his ready responsiveness to sentiment, is proof that experience had left his nature fundamentally unspoiled and that a current of perennial freshness flowed at its centre.

To identify oneself with the people is to identify oneself with the age. Sainte-Beuve does not entertain a cheap contempt, like Stendhal, Flaubert, Mérimée, and so many other men of talent, for the world around him. He had no

<sup>7</sup> CL 14-352.

nostalgia for the age of Nero, or of Caesar Borgia, or of Brantôme. He occasionally even expresses a mild satisfaction at having been born into the nineteenth century. Like all superior minds, he had a strong feeling for the living present. He is utterly removed from the pedantry which lives so comfortably ensconced in the past that it never inquires to what present use the past may be put. His greatest solicitude is to mediate between tradition and innovation, to see his own time with wholeness, with all that survives in it of the past, since, as Comte says, the present is made up more of the dead than of the living. Delicate literary connoisseur though he be, he does not view antiquity, like the philologist and the antiquarian, as something remote and apart; he relates it to the needs of today. Thus he distinguishes the *Aeneid*, which he finds preeminently national, Roman, and Augustan, from the purely literary and archaizing epic like the "*Argonautica*," and insists that the prime requirement of an epic is that it shall be living, which means that it must plunge its roots into the soil of contemporary life. He quotes Matthew Arnold's Preface to the "*Poems*" (1853), and while shrewdly recognizing in him even at that early date "a classic critic of the race of Lessing,"<sup>8</sup> he points out with his admirably sure taste the essential fallacy of that long line of coldly classic restorations to which Arnold's "*Merope*" belongs. This constant connection of literature with life, and this insistence that the artist shall not quarrel with his age, show that for Sainte-Beuve sound criticism reposes on a basis of sane and healthy feeling.

One of his most prominent characteristics is his modesty. He is everywhere present in his work, but never obtrusively or arrogantly. He makes the impression of being one of the most modest men of absolutely first-rate ability. In the romantic group with which he began his career, he is perhaps the only one who has not even the suspicion of a pose. To pass from any one of them to him is to have the sensation of coming into an atmosphere renewed and

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<sup>8</sup> Virgile-73.



cleared, into a world where sincerity is in order and truth is the current coin. The brilliantly factitious has given place to the normal and the natural.

This modesty is not the mere obverse of timidity, as it is in so many. It is a rational modesty based on the perception, denied to his vainer comrades, that men of talent are in essence more nearly human than divine and by no means so utterly different from the rest of mankind as they love to think themselves. He holds that all men who think end by achieving very much the same insights as the great writer prides himself on attaining. What they lack is the power of expression. "And so it is with youth. In vain do the Adolphes and the Renés fancy that their tempestuous passions are peculiar to them; all sensitive young hearts suffer much the same emotions, just as all judicious spirits attain much the same fruits of experience. But few have the talent for painting, just as few in later life have the courage for speaking."<sup>9</sup> Even the most distinguished of those who rise above the common level of humanity seem to Sainte-Beuve like those flying-fish that rise for an instant out of their native element only to plunge back into it again.<sup>10</sup> The figure no doubt violates the actual truth a little, but how much saner is such exaggeration of modesty than the insufferable pose of superiority that talent so commonly assumes! How reassuring, for example, to hear the Academy spoken of with due respect, and its traditions and performances with a sort of veneration even, in an age when, as always, a cheap gibe at its expense was sure to tickle the public, and when it was possible for Victor Hugo (at a safe distance) to propose the admission of Napoleon III to the Academy and the galleys! Sainte-Beuve, of all Academicians past or present the one most profoundly versed in literature, speaks of his academic privileges with an appreciativeness that makes us feel how much a compendium of civilization like the French Academy may bring in the way of stimulus and of inspiration into the life of a great man of letters. "In the discussions on our red-letter

<sup>9</sup> PC 5-462.

<sup>10</sup> PC 5-463.



days, in the conversations, so steeped in polite letters and so rich in mature thought, which were the life of our private sessions, how many times did I not find myself enriching my store of knowledge even where I believed myself on my own ground and best prepared!" Another proof that the great man receives as well as gives more than other men. In the same generous spirit Sainte-Beuve asserts that he was in some respects a disciple of Ampère, and that he owed to him a certain enlargement of his critical vision.<sup>11</sup>

In his criticism, he never takes on the oracular, hardly even the authoritative, tone. He treats his reader as his equal. He is the least dogmatic, aggressive, and loud-toned of men. He carries his unique gifts with unconscious lightness and unpretending ease, as if he were habitually unaware of them. Cousin once stigmatized him with the disdainful phrase, "*Sainte-Beuve n'est pas gentilhomme.*" Coming from the glass-house of Cousin and flung at one whose career as a writer was so much more scrupulously delicate than his own, that stone does not seem very felicitously aimed. Sainte-Beuve, save when he stoops to gossip, or when he is in an unusual ill-humor, is in spirit the very model of the gentleman of letters, hospitable to all excellence and charitable to shortcomings. He has an instinctive feeling that all loud affirmation and gesticulant emphasis are hostile to the amenity which alone can make literary discussion worthy of the literature that inspires it. What could be more aristocratic than such an attitude—and what could be more essentially modest?

Modesty is apt, however, to have a vulnerable side. Sainte-Beuve himself points out that the modest man is likely to be a little deficient in initiative and enterprise, in the free and complete use of his faculties, because this quality, if it persist and even grow in spite of time and experience, is not only a Christian and moral virtue but also the natural index of an inwardly felt limitation.<sup>12</sup> When he speaks of his contemporaries, at least in his early work, his tone is strangely deferential, so remote is he from ventur-

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<sup>11</sup> NL 13-224.

<sup>12</sup> CL 6-278.

ing to emphasize his own rôle. He resembles those timid people who instinctively gravitate toward the back seats. Only toward the last does he seem to estimate himself at his real value, and even then he continues to speak of his trade of critic as a very slight matter as compared with the creative work of the men of genius of whom he writes. He did not have an independent nature content to stand alone. He craved someone to lean on. Far superior in good sense and insight to the groups he was affiliated with, he remains always subordinated and dependent—and for many years with all the appearance of a willing dependence, led, not leading, an auxiliary, not a chief. Until long past the mid-milestone of his career, we find him always influenced, a follower and an interpreter of others, trying, often against his instinctive insight, to don the livery of some creed or party, and in the end drifting, rather than steering, away from his temporary harbors. That he withdrew for the most part in bitter disillusion, having encountered only another ego but not an *alter ego*, and in gloomy contention of spirit piecing together again the portions of his personality that he had too confidingly entrusted to the care of others, this needs no telling; it is the common lot of weak natures that seek to engraft themselves on more powerful ones or to warm themselves at another's fire. They have only themselves to blame for trying to impose an epicurean dream on the stern nature of things. "How much they remain at the mercy of the more powerful and often tyrannical souls that take possession of them, that exploit them, as we say, and make them their prey! And what pangs and what bitterness these misdirected admirations bring sooner or later to our sensibilities!"<sup>13</sup>

This weakness in his nature is closely related—for Sainte-Beuve's faults and qualities are strangely intertangled—to what is one of his most amiable traits, a highly social and friendly spirit. Friendship was a large part of his ideal of life, though with curious reserves and retreats that rendered its tenure highly precarious. In his slender

<sup>13</sup> PR 1-440.

sheaf of poems there is more tribute paid to friendship, and there are more poems addressed to friends, than in all the voluminous verses of his romantic contemporaries. The "Consolations," except a few sonnets, are all addressed to friends. He long continued to dream of finding a "terrestrial guardian angel such as sometimes accompanies us here below in the form of a friend."<sup>14</sup> He might even, but for certain unfortunate hitches in his own temper, have found such a friend—in Ampère, for example, or in Juste Olivier. But he knew better the art of making than of keeping friends.

He has a soft heart, full of very real and delicate sentiment, despite the too near neighborhood of the disturbing senses. He has a feminine sensibility, uneasy, quickly excited and quickly appeased, eager to give and to receive. In short, he has a romantic temper, open to all the caprices, the fragile ecstasies, the elegiac melancholies, the plaintive moodiness and the chronic low spirits that were so characteristic of the romanticists of his day. He has always a special susceptibility to feminine charm—enough even to threaten his critical integrity, according to Faguet, though the imputation seems unjust. At any rate, he abandons himself overmuch to this feeling, in life if not in literature. This is one of the reasons why the poet in him yielded place to the critic only with a poignant and lifelong regret. This is the reason also why the mature Sainte-Beuve, after having played the critic and the moralist all day, inclined at nightfall to abjure both the critical and the moral attitudes, and to snatch his pleasure wherever he could find it. In one of his latest essays, he tells how Humboldt, in his extreme old age, received innumerable letters from sympathetic women who aspired to be his nurses and comforters. Sainte-Beuve deprecates Humboldt's unreceptive attitude: "Had he been a little more a poet and a little less a courtier and society-man, he would not have smiled or jested, he would have been touched. Such devotion is one of the rewards that fall to the man of genius, and, after every

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<sup>14</sup> PR 1-411.



deduction, it is still the sweetest, if he have a heart."<sup>15</sup> This sentimental preachment, addressed by a Frenchman to a German, is indeed striking. It shows how indestructible is the soft fibre in a truly feminine nature, no matter how intellectually eminent be its possessor. Sainte-Beuve, to the very end, continued to be very fond of women—provided they did not deserve it.

Yet it is a curiously characteristic feature of his friendships that they are almost always related to his intellectual needs or to his literary sympathies. Insensibly and unpremeditatedly, they merge into the master passion of his life. He has none of the good-natured myopia that is necessary for perfect friendship. He remains both curious and critical even in his sentimental abandonments—and in their intermittences, which his over-susceptible and over-irritable temperament only too regularly suffered, curiosity and criticism often made him forget the sanctities of friendship. Those whom he had probed and analyzed perforce and involuntarily, he continued to anatomize and dissect with leisurely pertinacity. The trait is a little distressing. It was so to his friends. His cool analysis of such a warm-hearted old-time friend and benefactor as Ampère is perhaps a monument of critical sagacity, but hardly of sentimental delicacy. His abuse of George Sand's letters to him, which he used to show or lend out time and again to the curious (including Matthew Arnold), is suggestive of a monstrous indelicacy.\*

In 1852, when the government had passed into the usurping hands of Louis-Napoleon, Sainte-Beuve rallied to the new sovereign, and in his famous article *Les Regrets*<sup>16</sup> taunted the opposition with cultivating a deplorable and wilful malady, the foolish discontent of those who are ousted from place and who can no longer exploit their oratoric talents. It is a piquantly ironic reflection that Sainte-Beuve

<sup>15</sup> NL 9-401.

\* Cf. George Sand's letter to Liszt, May 5, 1836: "I cannot make Sainte-Beuve out. I loved him fraternally. He has passed his life in vexing me, in growling at me, in sermonizing me, and in suspecting me; so much so that I have ended by bidding him go to the devil. He got angry, and we are now on a hostile footing, it seems. I believe he has not a suspicion of what friendship means, and that he has instead a profound knowledge of the love of self, not to say of self only."

<sup>16</sup> CL 6-397.

himself ultimately, though a senator, denounced this despotism, so unfriendly to all freedom of thought, as "a vacillating, bastard, and nameless rule." After all allowances are made for diversity of views, it is impossible not to stigmatize as indelicate, not to say cruel, his ironic diagnosis of the political humor of what he called the *état-major des salons*, many of them disinterested patriots and most of them men of his own camp and even former friends. The younger generation evidently found it both cruel and indelicate, and retorted in kind by clamorously refusing to listen to the course of lectures on Virgil which Sainte-Beuve had prepared for delivery at the Collège de France—a public and scandalous humiliation which rankled in his heart to the last.

There is another dereliction on Sainte-Beuve's part, which has met with the severest censure and which stands out as the most striking example of this obliviousness of the respect due to sentiment, even to the ghost of a sentiment that time has consumed. Sainte-Beuve, several years after his relations with the Hugos had ended in complete estrangement, privately printed a little sheaf of poems addressed to Madame Hugo. He intended, no doubt, to withhold them from publicity until time should give its *imprimatur* to the "Livre d'Amour"—

Le temps, vieillard divin, honore et blanchit tout.

But he committed the indiscretion (and assumed the inevitable risk it involved) of putting his verses through the press. The natural result followed—the verses became known, and a public eager for scandal had the satisfaction, so dear to it always, of talking about great literary men without the painful preliminary of reading them. For those more given to the latter process than to the former, the most natural explanation, and the least harsh, is the time-honored one which is perhaps sufficient in this case as in many others. The real mistress of an author is the public. Beatrice and Laura, Lesbia and Cynthia, are in the end all synonyms of that supreme sovereign. Sainte-Beuve could suppress the article he had written on Hugo: *Le Cyclope littéraire*—it



was in prose; but he could not bring himself to hide away the questionable tributes he had paid to Madame Hugo—they were in verse! He felt, to use his own words in his essay on Bussy, “that paternal solicitude of the man of letters who wishes that nothing that he has once written shall be lost, and who is intent on winning golden opinions therewith, even at the risk of losing something of men’s esteem.”<sup>17</sup> For the benefit of the readers who may retain an old-fashioned desire to see the moral aspect of the subject more fully developed, Sainte-Beuve again furnishes the appropriate comment: “Let us not forget that the measure of morality varies singularly in different ages and countries; the imagination of poets has at all times been much inclined to falsify this measure. It is not uncommon for a poet to love his past so tenderly, even a painful past, even a disordered and guilty past, as to cling to it all the more in growing old, as to live more closely with it in memory, as to feel, even at the risk of ultimately losing in esteem, the passionate desire to transmit this past, so much so that he has the weakness of wishing to consecrate the whole of it. I commend this thought to those who have probed some of the hidden corners in the hearts of poets.”<sup>18</sup> Weakness, as Sainte-Beuve admits, there certainly is here, though perhaps its chief seat is not where he places it, but rather in the very sentiment which the poet so questionably strives and stoops to perpetuate.

It is noticeable that here again love is strangely intertangled with literature. This was also the case in another and more pleasing episode in his life, his friendship with a very pure and charming woman, Madame d’Arbouville, a friendship which, to judge from the letters that survive, might also have worn a more debatable aspect had it not been such a truly exquisite one—on her side. On the whole, a fuller study of Sainte-Beuve’s life would justify the conclusion that his nature was an eminently social one and that he had a decided turn, though hardly a decided talent, for

<sup>17</sup> CL 3-381.

<sup>18</sup> PC 4-265.

friendship—provided it did not suffer transformation into love or literature.

Sainte-Beuve's whole work, despite romantic aberrations, emphasizes wisdom and virtue. How far did he himself achieve these? In a greater degree, I think, than is usually admitted, yet still in a somewhat disappointing measure. One can hardly help saying, as Emerson did of Shakespeare, that he was not wise for himself. Both his wisdom and his virtue were in many respects of that inferior variety which is held in solution instead of being precipitated in tangible crystallizations. They were not readily embodied in conduct. The irrepressible conflict between theory and practice was peculiarly acute in his case. He raises with a special cogency the question how far a writer who lives so largely in his work is excusable if he consume his fund of wisdom and virtue so freely here that he has an inadequate supply left over for daily life. Carlyle, for example, has been treated leniently on this score; Sainte-Beuve has been treated harshly. He had, to be more explicit, an exquisite spirit lodged in a cynical body. In thought he is at his best akin to the wise, in conduct he is in some ways akin to the foolish. The crucial question in judging him is that of the relative emphasis to be put on these conflicting elements. His work sufficiently attests the exquisiteness of his spirit. The cynicism in conduct, that so unpleasantly contrasts with the general tone of his work, is sufficiently hinted in the story of the young woman who came to Sainte-Beuve's funeral expecting to be remembered in his will, and was told that if all rivals with similar claims to favor had come to the ceremony the procession would have extended from the house to the cemetery. Let charity discount as much as it will for the unscrupulousness of French wit, such a story remains damaging. It furnishes an excuse for those of Sainte-Beuve's biographers who interpret the work by the man—following his own method, they might claim. Yet, without condoning his weaknesses, there is something to be said on the other side. We lay more stress on Solomon's wisdom than on his wives. Some of

Sainte-Beuve's critics have reversed this procedure. They overlook the fact that few men ever succeeded so well in keeping their besetting weakness from suborning their moral self. There is in Sainte-Beuve's work almost no direct echo of his cynicism. He has accepted the moral tradition as he accepted time-honored tradition in general, with a wise unwillingness to substitute for it the precarious notions of the individual. And this moral conservatism is genuine and deep-rooted. It is based on a profound and sympathetic understanding of the poetry as well as of the wisdom underlying the moral ideals of mankind. Sainte-Beuve's thought is always serious, and it usually aims at being wise. He has none of the irresponsible intellectual caprice of Renan, none of the intellectual arrogance and over-indulgence of the individual sense that is found in Taine. He is loyally intent on truth, unlike his alleged disciples Le-maître and Anatole France. He sinks himself in his subject, takes endless pains in all matters of detail, and makes no sacrifices on the altar of cleverness; he is, in truth, the very opposite of these two brilliant but not very wise impressionists who are so ready to draw everything from their own scintillating wits while forgetting their responsibility to their subject. Sainte-Beuve is far wiser than any of the leaders of French thought in his day, because he allies himself more nearly with what has passed for wisdom through the ages. This means that he is at bottom more truly philosophic. To hit on individual truths may be an exploit of the pure intellect; to hit on a whole multitude of individual truths may be a triumph of intellect conjoined with good sense; but to keep so constantly near the truth as Sainte-Beuve did, to live up to the device, *vitam impendere vero* as he did, demands moral virtue as well. To love *justesse* is to love justice.

This love of *justesse* Sainte-Beuve has expended chiefly on matters of intellectual concern. He is a less dazzling performer than a number of his rivals, but no French writer of his century has such constant and such penetrating good sense. Good sense is not so showy as brilliancy,



but it wears better, and Sainte-Beuve's reputation is unquestionably the most securely founded that his age offers. Brilliant conjectures and ambitious constructions crumble and are forgotten; graceful variations on questions of the hour become antiquated; but ideas steeped in good sense and dealing with matters of real moment have enduring vitality. Sainte-Beuve always arrives at his intellectual judgments, in so far as he pretends to judge, on the basis of good sense. It is to his intellectual conceptions what taste is to his aesthetic impressions. And he possesses good sense in a degree fairly unique in a restless and unsettled age by no means remarkable for this quality. He has a peculiarly quick eye for whatever is hazardous, shifting, or chimerical. "Every precept," he says, "if not carefully interpreted, is liable to abuse. By dint of repeating to the young king: 'Be soft-hearted, humane, affable,' Massillon, like Fénelon himself, was urging him in the direction of what is Utopian; he seemed to believe in that fostering love which the people do not feel, and which great kings and those reputed most good-natured, such kings as Henri IV even, have never believed in. Massillon by this part of his "Petit Carême" heralds a policy . . . which, when really applied, turned out to be so disastrous for Louis XVI, for Malesherbes, for those men who were so excellent and therefore so over-confident in the excellence of nature."<sup>19</sup>

That is worldly wisdom, but how commonly the good sense that underlies it is renounced in favor of sentimental sophistries! In Sainte-Beuve it remains so incorruptible that it enables him at times to show himself superior in judgment to the erudite specialist. Speaking of Ampère's version of Roman history, he says: "Though, to begin with, I do not feel myself a competent judge, and though this learning, so full, so solid, so overflowing in its way, dazzles and dismays me, yet in certain matters I need only my own sense to be on my guard. As regards the origins, I am astonished that one should venture to have any very set opinions as to many things. What Ampère rejects and

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<sup>19</sup> CL 9-31.

what he accepts at this point seems to me altogether arbitrary and less dependent on any method than on a personal impression and on a sort of divination acquired by living a long time in the same places and by sleeping in the cave of the Sibyl.”<sup>20</sup> When Ampère promises to elicit the truth as to the rape of the Sabine women, Sainte-Beuve only smiles. When Ampère calls Scipio a charlatan, Sainte-Beuve finds the historian over-bold; and when Ampère tries to disprove the mysticism of Scipio by the physiognomy of his bust, Sainte-Beuve reflects that Roman busts are by no means all authentic, nor all good, that it is hazardous to set up as another Lavater, and extra-hazardous to pretend to read the characters of statesmen in their busts and portraits. This is only good sense—but evidently Sainte-Beuve had more of it than Ampère. A testimony to the high value he sets on this quality is found in his cult for Franklin (just as his cult for Cicero testifies to his special zeal for letters). He mentions Franklin with a respect which shows that he holds him in peculiar honor among the great moralists: he mentions him along with Socrates and Aristotle.

Good sense is preservative rather than creative. By seeing the real bearing of things it preserves us from being dupes. Applied to speculative matters, it is in the main abstinent and negative and tends toward scepticism. Its enthusiasms are lucid and seem a bit cool, especially to those of romantic temper. As Sainte-Beuve says, “To see things and men as they are requires an intelligence that is cured of enthusiasm, and that has, I fear, contracted a certain coldness.”<sup>21</sup> Refusing to be the dupe of his own enthusiasm, he is thoroughly on his guard against that of others. While modestly acknowledging his slight initiation into mediæval lore, he yet ventures to suspect Renan’s affection for the Middle Ages of being over-zealous: he smiles at Renan’s notion that by their very barriers and repressions they favored the rise of great and solitary thinkers—“unless a prison may be said to develop the strength of the prisoner

<sup>20</sup> NL 13-256.

<sup>21</sup> CL 13-2.



who succeeds in breaking through the bars.”<sup>22</sup> That is to see the Middle Ages in true perspective—with antiquity behind them and the modern world before them.

Yet Sainte-Beuve does not lack the temperamental ardor, the sensuousness and the sensitiveness of mood and the capacity for brooding revery that combine to make up illusion and enthusiasm. In his youth these tendencies even prevailed at times over his perspicacious vision, at times held it in check. He attached himself to many men and to many causes, only to detach himself again. His retreats have provoked the charge that he lacked enthusiasm. His advances might more reasonably suggest that he had too much enthusiasm—subject to correction from an incorruptible good sense that refused to be bribed or seduced. He tells us that he entered Hugo’s house as if it had been the grot of a demigod, and deserted it when it proved to be the den of the Cyclops. The experience was typical. Of a decidedly timid nature with a strain of feminine dependence at its centre, he instinctively looked for a guide and philosopher in his friends. But his friends were nearly all men of letters with the weaknesses of the tribe written large on their hearts. And they were to his critical eye as open books; he read the displeasing secret, and again and again had to repent his short-lived illusions and to resign himself to a growingly cautious scepticism. By degrees, and after many painful struggles, the attitude became an habitual one. He says that no one will ever guess how great these secret sufferings were. They were occasionally revealed with an unmistakable poignancy of accent in a random sentence in his work; more commonly, they are translated into discreet irony. Youth once past, a change comes over the spirit of Sainte-Beuve. The friendly advocate has become a judge—in the eyes of many, an unfriendly judge. “Fifteen years ago,” he says, “I made a portrait of Béranger, all light without shadows. . . When young, I portrayed the poets with much affection and enthusiasm. I do not repent of it. I even practiced some connivance. Now I show

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<sup>22</sup> NL 2-407.

nothing of this, I confess; I have only the sincere desire to see and show people and things as they are, such at least as they, at this moment, appear to me."<sup>23</sup>

The kind of enthusiasm that is all light without shadows and which rests on a secret love of illusion and a willingness to be agreeably duped—and often to dupe others agreeably—is not compatible with the genuinely critical spirit. Sainte-Beuve has a just sense of proportion; he thinks in comparatives, not in superlatives. His admiration, even at its warmest, is weighed and reasoned, not effervescent. It is circumspect, and has not the wild graces of romantic fervor. His mood seldom culminates in an *O altitudo!* His adjectives, almost superabundant, are expressive of subtle shadings—so much so as to render him the despair of the translator. He distrusted the unchaperoned adjective, and always tried to provide it with the escort of the masculine parts of speech. He translated epithets into ideas and ecstasy into rationality. But all this only proves him a judicious enthusiast, whose literary sensitiveness was so universally diffused through his whole organism that it extended to his reason itself. His primary taste was for the moderate; extremes, even of genius, repelled him when they overstepped the modesty of nature. He is most truly at home in the middle and temperate zones in literature, those not too remote from normal human experience. He is a little cold when led into the wilder and more solitary regions, those in which a lawless mood, plied to the utmost, stands tip-toe on some strange and untrod mountain-peak, high in the intense inane. He questions the irrational sublimities of romantic impulse mad with inspiration and defiant of order. He is distrustful of the tyrannous faculties that intone their solos without even the choral accompaniment of the rest. His temper is ultimately classical. His enthusiasm is of the kind that diffuses itself over a large area, laterally and at many points, not of the exclusive kind that concentrates and soars. That is why, at first sight, it is a natural error to underestimate or overlook it.

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<sup>23</sup> CL 2-287.

This wide distribution of his enthusiasm has led some critics to question not only it but the sincerity behind it. Sainte-Beuve seems to them merely curious, often profanely curious amid sacred things, seeking an intellectual thrill where simpler natures surrender themselves with uninquiring devotion. He had to take so few steps into an experience in order to see its farther boundaries, and he made so many disconcerting halts and retreats, that he puzzled his friends, as he does us; they asked how far his adherence was real and ardent, how far it was merely experimental and inquisitive.

Sainte-Beuve, like most men, paid a preliminary tribute to his temperament before paying the final and life-long tribute to the talent in which lay his real vocation. The romanticist at first dominated the critic, but never completely. The rational Sainte-Beuve was present under the temperamental one. The classicist existed piecemeal; the romanticist was mainly constituted by a disorderly putting together of the pieces. These had only to await the ordering hand of time to achieve their permanent form. Sainte-Beuve was temporarily in love with romanticism, but he loved open-eyed, and the intimacy served above all to reveal to his disquieting sagacity the faults of his idol. Love has only to cool—and love as perspicacious as his is sure to do so—and the lover turns critic, his criticism inevitably carrying with it a suggestion of the disenchantment, the ill-will, and almost the perfidy of the renegade. In reality, it was only the perfidy of time, of experience, and of maturing talent, that gave this inevitable affront to the dead past. It is the penalty which the critical spirit must pay whenever it revises its instinctive valuations, rejects what is useless, and passes on its way. It is also the penalty paid by a lively curiosity which moves faster than its companions. Sainte-Beuve, like Goethe, displeased narrower minds by aspiring to a sort of intellectual omnipresence. The metamorphoses through which he passed in the course of a decade between his twentieth and his thirtieth years were many. As a medical student, he subscribed to the physiologic materialism of the eighteenth century, anticipating the extreme



naturalism of a later date. Associated with the *Globe*, for which he wrote his first critical studies, he fell in with writers of a more elevated philosophy. Then, in rapid succession, come brief connections with the romantic poets, the Saint-Simonist reformers, the Catholic group of Lamennais, and the circle of Vinet and the Calvinists at Lausanne, before whom he lectured on the Jansenists of Port-Royal. It was a period of unrest during which Sainte-Beuve, like the age itself, was vainly seeking a religion, a philosophy, a political and a literary creed. He sums this up later as a long course in moral physiology, as an initiation through tireless curiosity into all the current forms of thought and feeling, as a series of experiments in ascertaining the purely relative truth of things. It is true that this was for him the net result: he learned to enter with profound insight and with an almost incredible sympathy into ideas and emotions that remained nevertheless alien to him. But one cannot do this so thoroughly without in some degree surrendering oneself. There are, however, many stages in the process of surrender. The nearness to the line where religion becomes a reality is far greater in the earlier than in the later volumes of "Port-Royal." In the final rupture with Lamennais, there is the unmistakable cry of a disappointed and wounded spirit. In his poetry Sainte-Beuve is more romantic than classic; he is so likewise for a long time in his fluctuations between innovation and tradition. By degrees the ferment subsided, and, in his inability to make an exclusive choice, he became a fluid sceptic without any ultimate faith. But he had made such near approaches to a variety of faiths that he remained too sympathetic to be a complete sceptic. He moves in the interval between assent and denial, with divided sympathies, speaking with strangely varying degrees of warmth, but never with complete indifference. He is in this curiously representative of his age, curiously unrepresentative of the age of Voltaire to which his philosophy as such was most closely related. How far we are from Voltaire is shown by the fact that Sainte-Beuve's religious poetry actually converted a young Frenchman to Christianity. His nearness to Voltaire appears in



his denunciations of the "clerical leprosy," in the noise, greater than that made by all his *Lundis*, provoked by his famous meat-dinner on the *Vendredi-Saint*, and in the challenge which, as a representative of the "Diocese of good sense," he received from a fanatical brother senator.

On the whole, despite the Bohemian laxity that he carries with him through life as a legacy of his early drifting, Sainte-Beuve impresses one as essentially, and even in a high degree, an *honnête homme*. His failure, in certain essential respects, to show himself uniformly such is regrettable, but it is explicable. Alone, and desperately ill-adapted for a lonely life, he needed, quite as much as he missed, the support of an attendant spirit. "Happy the man," he cries, "who finds in a comrade and friend a second and sometimes a first conscience, a perpetual witness to encourage him, to embolden him, to support him, and whom everywhere and always, absent or present, he habitually respects! Then indeed, if he outlives him, he may cry with Pliny the Younger: I have lost a witness of my life—I fear that henceforth I may live more carelessly."<sup>24</sup>

This impression of sterling worth combined with a certain fineness of temper is supported by his whole work. It is reenforced by his correspondence. In it he stands revealed as a man modest, sensible, obliging, and singularly free from all trace of offensive egotism, entertaining a surprising number of pleasant human relations which do honor to his heart, and to his head as well. There is not a trace of pose; he possesses that supremely human grace which we so vainly seek in his literary fellows, naturalness. He is as simple and sincere as Matthew Arnold, to the surprise of his censors, proved to be in his letters—though we do not find here the same aroma of superior elevation which marks Arnold as the worthy son of so worthy a father. As a personality, Sainte-Beuve moves rather in the middle ranges, but he moves there with real distinction always. He walks a little nearer to his fellows than Arnold did, and appears as a more social and accessible nature. He is of an extraordinary kindliness. One is dumbfounded at the conscientious

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<sup>24</sup> CL 9-154.

good-will with which he actually reads, and candidly yet almost tenderly criticizes, the dozens of books poured upon him even during his busiest years by humble authors whom we never hear of elsewhere. And with what frequency and what genuine concern he plays both the worldly and spiritual adviser to men—as well as women—who ask for direction! His letters almost suffer from a monotonous continuity of good-will distributing its ministration to a hundred beneficiaries with a devotion and a courtesy that are wholly admirable. The unrivaled breadth of his sympathies had its source not only in his intelligence but in a peculiar readiness to see and feel the profound pain and bitterness which the struggle of life, on the purely material as well as on higher planes, brings to all those who play the unspectacular utility-rôles in what is for most of them only the human comedy—or tragedy. That he only slightly augmented the slender inheritance which his parents left him, and that it is his ever-ready charity which must chiefly be cited in explanation, might well evoke more of that virtue in his biographers.

And finally, the latest letters, so painful to read, are a genuine monument of heroism. Sainte-Beuve reveals himself here as a not unworthy disciple of the stoic emperor whom he sometimes proposed as a model for the modern sceptical moralist. He suffers slow extinction, yet he labors unremittingly to the end, resigned, uncomplaining, and heroically serene.

Although Sainte-Beuve dejectedly asserted in his recurrent moods of melancholy that men do not ripen, he contradicted the theory by himself ripening. The romantics in general were stationary, or even showed a decline in power or in rationality as they grew older. Their best capital was their youth, their gift of feeling, their capacity for enthusiasm, for imaginative illusion, and the consequent heightening of all the attendant faculties. Time blunted their qualities and staled their freshness. At best they repeated themselves with virtuosity. They did not grow. Sainte-Beuve grew steadily and improved to the last. That is because his finest virtues lay in a sublimated rationality

which youth cannot compass, and which culture alone can foster. He must not be judged too much, as presented by his biographers, in his natural and unadorned self. His greatest merit is in his resolute and steady holding off of this self at arm's length, in his refusal to be identified with it. That implies an unusual degree of humility, a subordination of the self that is and that one loves to an ideal self that one loves only in an impersonal and therefore a really meritorious manner. Sainte-Beuve conjures the historian to repudiate the anecdote, whether true or not, which pictures the great minister Sully in his maturest years, as indulging in mad dances with a ridiculous bonnet on his pate. "The true character of Sully," he says, "is much more apparent in his public and constant observance of gravity than in any private infraction of it, if such there be."<sup>25</sup> Sainte-Beuve has therefore a claim to a considerable measure of charitable indulgence, such as may justly be refused to most of his contemporary rivals. His thought inevitably fails at times in that continuous elevation which is the exclusive privilege of such pure spirits as he loved to depict in his "Port-Royal," and among whom he sought his masters in moral science. His own sensuous and sceptical temper stood in his path and barred his progress. He was no saint—far from it—but he never worshipped or even condoned the weaknesses which he never conquered. In conduct he is in some very important respects with Chateaubriand, Lamartine, and Hugo; but in his standards, and without a touch of hypocrisy, he is usually with the Jouberts and the Scherers, with the sage and sound moralists.

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<sup>25</sup> CL 8-140.

## II

### THE SCHOLAR

“You that have been  
Ever at home, yet have all countries seen,  
And, like a compass keeping one foot still  
Upon your centre, do your circle fill  
Of general knowledge; watched men; manners too;  
Heard, what past times have said; seen, what ours do;  
Which Grace shall I make love to first? Your skill?  
Or faith in things? Or is't your wealth and will  
T' inform, and teach? Or your unwearied pain  
Of gathering? Bounty in pouring out again?

—*Ben Jonson*

When the intellect, instead of being a syllogistic mechanism, is an intuitive power, it is really, as well as etymologically, witty, because its quick flashes of insight combine both the surprise that is the mark of wit and the simultaneous vision of incongruous opposites which is the inspiration of humor. Men of keen and quick perception often impress us as witty even when they aim only at being lucid, because perfect lucidity not only illumines the whole object that it views but also the relations of its solider and its lighter parts, and reflects their interplay. Though Sainte-Beuve's manner is fundamentally serious and shows no particular turn for the by-play of wit, it is permeated with this kind of lightness. It is lucid and lively though never exuberant. His lightness is of the quiet order that proceeds from an exquisitely sensitive taste, alive, but not disproportionately alive, to the lighter sides of the gravest things. It is not so much humor as an approach to humor, an opening of communications with it. Neither witty nor humorous in his own right, Sainte-Beuve's vision is in this region, as it is everywhere, of an unerring keenness, and wherever nature smiles or grimaces he catches at once the intention of sprightliness or sportiveness on her part. He does not present us with a caricature but sets us face to face



with the living original—in whom the caricature is implicit. He is therefore the writer in whom we least miss the stimulus of humor, because he has, in his work, if not in his life, that cheerful sanity of vision which wit and humor sometimes bring as their chief reward—and which is so much more important than themselves.

When the vein of humor is a rich one and is central in one's personality, it is more powerful and more active than it is in Sainte-Beuve. It ends by overflowing into the other faculties and coloring and animating them. Humor is apt to run into good-humor. When the vein is a minor one, occasional and perhaps a little thin in its flow, it is likely to remain somewhat neutral or to express itself through the less vital faculties, at times through susceptible and irritable nervous reactions. Humor is then apt to run into ill-humor. Sainte-Beuve, though not a humorist, has a vein of delicate, half disguised mockery more nearly akin to satire than to humor. Lemaître can amuse us infinitely more at the expense of an author who exposes his flank—witness Ohnet—but the succession of incisive pin-pricks that Sainte-Beuve administers is really far more effective as criticism. Lemaître's comic strokes we remember as so many single felicities. Sainte-Beuve quietly adds touch on touch to his portrait, and we remember this as a whole. In Lemaître the result seems more comic than reality; in Sainte-Beuve reality itself seems comic.\* "I am not fond of satire," he says, "but I can understand it, and I admit it." In fact, he not infrequently practices it. Among so many other riches, including a little Iliad of heroic figures drawn with epic grandeur, there is a little Dunciad scattered through his work—all the more piquant because, instead of setting on the foolscap with his own hand, he forces his victim to do so himself and to writhe under a shower of quotations from his own work. He says: "I dislike polemics in connection with literature, and I believe them rather futile."<sup>1</sup> He practiced them, nevertheless. He had not the

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\* For an example, see the sketch of the Abbé de Pradt, in NL IX, 237.

<sup>1</sup> NL 3-220

sage self-control that remains unruffled by attack. He retorted.

This, however, is an exceptional mood; his usual mood has even a certain mild exhilaration, whenever the occasion sanctions it; we do not miss the sharp turn of the epigram that so often seems indicated, but so seldom comes. It is typical of that lucklessness that dogged Sainte-Beuve's footsteps that it should have been one of his rare epigrams that led to his epoch-making break with the *Moniteur*, to the transfer of his last *Lundis* to the *Temps*, and to his quarrel with the Princess Mathilde.

What there is of the epigrammatic element in Sainte-Beuve is so purely a pointed product of his intellect, and is so closely mortised into his thought, that it hardly affects one as a conscious emanation of wit. He smiles in passing, but he does not stop to indulge the sportive mood for its own sake. "The Abbé de Saint-Pierre," he says, "was a man who concerned himself much with the happiness of mankind in general and very little with the happiness of the man in particular to whom he talked [the worthy Abbé was a bore] . . . a man who had received the gift of being infelicitous, as others have received that of speaking to the point."<sup>2</sup> That is very good, so far as it goes. Still, in a land where one is said to carry his whole point if only he have the laughers on his side, the command of a more piercing weapon of ridicule has its advantages. Sainte-Beuve knew all the weaknesses of his adversaries far better than Voltaire knew those of the Frérons and Desfontaines that he immortalized in his pages. He tells the whole truth, but without the egregious touches of caricature that make the victim seem doubly ridiculous and the critic only semi-responsible often even with a false semblance of amiability. Lemaître, in dealing with the romanticists, has given some of them far more laughable grimaces and has sketched into their profiles something far more amusingly awry and askew—yet Sainte-Beuve is accused of malice toward all, while Lemaître is smilingly charged with having spoken a

<sup>2</sup> CL 15-257.

bit disrespectfully of Victor Hugo and one or two other illustrious ones. Wit, when pungent enough, has its immunities in France more than elsewhere—possibly because it is so much commoner. Sainte-Beuve's manner lies in a middle region. Without sacrifice of seriousness he escapes solemnity, that slight penalty that we suffer for the excellence of Scherer and Brunetière; and he escapes frivolity, that greater penalty that we suffer for the inimitable graces of Lemaître and Anatole France. Sainte-Beuve on the whole comes near to achieving the ideal critical manner: a light and lively tone, the lightness and liveliness being intrinsic rather than superficial, combined with unflinching solidity of content. He has imported the Horatian *dulcia sunt* into the labors of the literary censor, long so starched and so severe of aspect. There is no critic from whom we carry off so much with so little effort.

To say that Sainte-Beuve is so preeminently a critic is to say that intellect dominated in him. The turn it took was rather in the direction of knowledge than of speculation. The speculator is often more interested in the brilliant exercise of his faculty than in the results it achieves. Sainte-Beuve's chief interest was in positive rather than in speculative ideas, in the tangible fruits which his roving intelligence could gather. He cared only for concrete and verifiable ideas, for those that are closely related to fact. That was his whole conception of truth—truth of experience. He gathers his facts, not in the interest of foregone convictions, but as materials for induction. But he is profoundly sceptical, his inductions are few, are largely provisional, and do not usually lie very close to his heart. He seems, in the main, simply curious, insatiably curious. But his curiosity is of a highly intelligent order: it is concentrated primarily on human nature and secondly on human experience. Literature and history are the two great fields to which it turns; in both it seeks the individual and all that pertains to him, much less for the sake of utilizing this knowledge in the conduct of life than for the sake of the lucidity that knowledge brings.



The measure of Sainte-Beuve's curiosity is not easy to take. Nothing that constitutes a memento of the passage of the human pilgrim along the pathway of time leaves him indifferent. The catholicity of his interests is suggested in his endless store of anecdotes, of casual testimony, of *obiter dicta*. These are almost never open to the charge of being only the idle indulgences of the collector of random lore; they minister in some way, however slightly, to the larger curiosity and illumine some corner of human nature. But how perilously close they come at times to being mere gossip! And how much one is tempted to suspect behind them the presence of a vast body of secret anecdote, which utility has not sanctioned, which taste has suppressed, and which a prying inquisition had gathered for its own illicit delectation!

Sainte-Beuve is not temperamentally averse to moving in that questionable region where fact is only trivially or ignobly significant. As a disciple of the inveterate old gossip Bayle, he occasionally rehearses details which repel more than they edify. He seems at times over-anxious to find out the weak point and the seamy side, and over-ready to trace it in the possibly insignificant flaw or sporadic aberration of the personality he is studying. "One must not be too good a man morally if he wishes to understand these great rogues," he says, in speaking of Cardinal de Retz,—and he is himself very curious of understanding them. He concludes: "Do not penetrate too deeply into the subsoil of literature, you who love it with a virginal, honest, and simple love."<sup>3</sup> It is true that the advice here given is usually acted on by Sainte-Beuve himself, for his taste does not ordinarily abdicate even to his curiosity. What subject more tempting for a gossip than Ninon de l'Enclos? The Goncourts, genuine gossips, fairly lived on eighteenth century scandal. Of Ninon Sainte-Beuve says: "The order of succession of her lovers has been discussed as punctiliously almost as that of the Assyrian or Egyptian kings. . . But this Ninon, the rival and heir of Marion Delorme, we shall

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<sup>3</sup> CL 5-399 (note).



pass by.”<sup>4</sup> What interests him in Ninon is the woman of wit, the friend of Saint-Evremond, the woman who said: “*La joie de l’esprit en marque la force*,” and who, in her own way, contributed so much to develop and perfect French manners—if not morals.

He is also not unready, with the ardor so characteristic of the scientific observer, to record a fragmentary observation without being sure whether it will prove anything or not. Are we really any wiser as to the historian Mézeray on learning that in his last years he so much neglected his personal appearance that he was once on the point of being imprisoned as a vagabond? Sainte-Beuve often makes one feel that curiosity is in its essence a decidedly profane quality, *libido sciendi*. This is patent in his recurrent idea that wisdom is in great part only to be derived from vice, that one should in youth, as Goethe puts it, drink from the full goblet of error. “Innocence has not the knowledge of evil. To see this in its plenitude, one must almost have practiced it. The stain on our heart is a sort of inner mirror of evil; the more it spreads, the more complete the mirror becomes.”<sup>5</sup> To put so high a premium on knowledge of this order, and to countenance the achievement of it at such a price, suggests not only a somewhat unregulated and inordinate curiosity, but even a certain scepticism as to the nature of true wisdom. Sainte-Beuve does not always, and does not firmly enough, distinguish between the negative enlightenment of the man of the world, and the more vital insight that belongs to the saints and sages.

Breadth of vision is at any rate the reward of such boundless curiosity. Nothing human is alien to Sainte-Beuve. He wishes to know, and, if possible, to know exactly, many things which to most of his readers might seem utterly foreign to literature and to literary preoccupations. History? Well and good! But the career of General Jomini? The strategy of warfare, ancient and modern? That seems decidedly special. Yet Sainte-Beuve says that he cannot conceive how a cultivated Greek,

<sup>4</sup> CL 4-175-6.

<sup>5</sup> PC 5-461.

familiar with Homer and Sophocles, should be without a precise idea of the battle of Leuctra; and a Frenchman seems to him incomplete who should applaud the "Cid" yet not have a similar knowledge of the battle of Rocroi. "There are battles that are also classic and that one must understand fully, as one does other masterpieces."<sup>6</sup>

To extol Sainte-Beuve's learning may seem like emphasizing what is in literary matters a very secondary quality. In criticism, learning is at any rate indispensable, although secondary. Sainte-Beuve has a sound esteem for facts. In that he decidedly belongs to the age of science in which he lived. In its proper territory science can never be too scientific for him: he hates a loose grasp on the truth. "How much vagueness even among the most learned, and how ready men are to talk of everything without adequate study! Let us journalists and improvisers, so easily tempted by every subject, beware and learn prudence."<sup>7</sup> He did not need to address this warning to himself. The most voluminous of critics, he is also the most impeccably accurate as well as the most circumspect. He almost never risks a hazardous conjecture; he seldom attempts subjects too foreign to lie easily within his competence. Although he regrets that we live in an age when fact is at war with romance and when erudition, document in hand, restrains the imagination with its imperious *nec plus ultra*, still he loves the truth above all else, and consents, though sometimes grudgingly, to sacrifice poetry to its inexorable demands. "Poetry alone has taken in hand the traditions of Andromache and Hecuba, and we have not the memoirs of the court of Priam, while we have those of the court of Louis XVI and must needs take them into account."<sup>8</sup> He thus gives us a Marie-Antoinette, not as Burke chivalrously painted her in her most poetic and queenly attitude, but in her mingling of untutored ignorance, of fragility, of frivolity, with tardier unfolding of finer qualities. The poet in Sainte-Beuve never prejudices the historian. He is equally

<sup>6</sup> NL 6-214.

<sup>7</sup> NL 10-112.

<sup>8</sup> CL 4-332.

solicitous, however, that the historian shall not prejudice the poet: "Where is the historian who shall succeed in combining the beauty and the purity of form, which were in every kind of literature the peculiar virtue of the ancients, with the profound research that is imposed on the moderns? Can we still hope to achieve this?"<sup>9</sup> What distressed him in the contemporary historians was the dragging into the foreground of such masses of detail as preclude real form. "We should not introduce our guests by way of the kitchen," he says. Objecting to the prolix and formless studies, stuffed with facts and citations, studies of the kind so painfully familiar to the American student of letters, he says: "I esteem the learned study; I demand it; but I wish the learning to be intestine and not paraded. To-day, the document overshadows everything; it crowds out charm and talent."<sup>10</sup>

The triumph of the document impressed him as being far too noisily celebrated; he is for observing a proper moderation. M. Jal disinters the baptismal certificate of La Bruyère. "Good," says Sainte-Beuve, "still this is not an occasion for ringing all the bells in Paris, as if we had got the birth certificate of Homer himself. Let us be on our guard. It is, in general, a bad sign for a literary epoch to run to such excesses of enthusiasm and to misplace thus its admiration. Sound ages observe proportion in esteem and eulogy. The learned Abbé Goujet remains in his place, and Voltaire in his."<sup>11</sup>

It is in dealing with facts that Sainte-Beuve shines as compared with the few rivals that might seem to challenge his supremacy. He does not, like them, exhibit any signs of strain and effort. He has the superiority of the swift-footed Achilles over the ponderous Ajax. Taine's mind was an unrivalled instrument for gathering up a whole congeries of facts on any subject; Brunetière's mind was a vast encyclopedia of ordered data. Sainte-Beuve carried his knowledge with unpretentious lightness; his learning seem-

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<sup>9</sup> CL 4-586.

<sup>10</sup> CL 14-216.

<sup>11</sup> NL 10-420.



ed only a convenience, half unheeded in the multiplicity of his rich equipment, like Apollo's minor gift of healing or Minerva's of spinning. It never has, like Taine's, a suggestion of frantic accumulation, or, like Brunetière's, of being pedantic lumber. Nor does it ever, like that of the academic *savant*, have an unpleasant smell of newness or that chilly deadness that hints of recent exhumation. The gentleman is here, as everywhere, more prominent than the scholar. Take such a passage as that in which Sainte-Beuve speaks of Ronsard's sonnet, in which the poet vauntingly proposes to read the Iliad in three days: Sainte-Beuve passes in review the whole major line of French writers and measures off-hand the familiarity of each of them with Homer!

His insistence on profound knowledge has limited Sainte-Beuve's range of study; French literature, and incidental to it, French history, and the classical antiquity that is their background, constitute the main body of his knowledge. Of other things he had but a smattering; of philosophy, for example, he had hardly even a smattering. He knew little of other modern literatures, though he read the Italian poets and some of the great English writers in the original. His reading of English has left some reflection in his work, but it is confined to a few authors. In fact, he read them with some difficulty. Even the Lake poets, whom he hailed as masters, seem not to have been very intimately penetrated by him. Pope he perhaps understood best, he esteemed Cowper and Crabbe, and, like all Frenchmen of his day, he magnified Byron. Shakespeare, though he saw him without the usual French distortions, seems to have left no very marked impression on him. His notion of Boswell is echoed from Macaulay's unhappy performance; he speaks of Gray as living by the single *Elegy*; he speaks with a curious respect of Kirke White, as though he were a landmark in English poetry; and he refers with the unenlightened French prejudice to the Anglican Church as "a compendium of every kind of cupidity and hypocrisy."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> PL 2-436.



In short, while he made an occasional foray across the English border, he made no important conquests.

Latin literature, however, he knew as few moderns have done. His spirit was steeped in it; it was present to him at every turn; it was, outside of the native fund, his most constant term of comparison. It was a part of his literary religion, and he is continually pausing, when his mood rises, to draw from it some memorable or some marmoreal phrase that elevates his utterance and throws a ray of golden light across his page.

As a Grecian, he had the elegance rather than the scholarly exactness of an Oxford don. He had not enjoyed like Matthew Arnold the privilege of prolonged initiation during the maturing years of school life, and his Hellenism was in the main an aftermath of the scanty interludes of leisure in a very busy career. Yet it was for all that of a not unavailing kind and gave to his criticism of classic writers a surety and an insight which many a professional scholar might envy. He admitted that he was far more at ease in the Ionic plain with Homer than in the high uplands of Pindar. At any rate, he read his Homer repeatedly and with an understanding delight, and he discourses of the Greek spirit ever and again as one who has been admitted to its inner sanctuary. It is a very essential part of his critical background. Scherer even lauded him as *le dernier des délicats*—the last of the moderns of truly Attic taste.

His whole professional effort was really confined to the French literature of the last four centuries. The atlas of French literature, as Taine would say, existed in his mind in more detail than in any other human head. One wonders if any one was ever so well read in any literature, or had the results of his reading so much at his command. The all-knowing Brunetière (who quoted all his dates from memory, with the curious trick of going just one year wrong as often as not) may seem to have had the same atlas as completely inscribed on the vast convolutions of his brain; but his knowledge had an ultimate note of specialization. Sainte-Beuve belongs to that giant race before the flood (of documentary data) who took all knowledge for

their province, not to the modern race of scholars who take a province for all their knowledge. The knowledge of Sainte-Beuve, so ebullient at every moment in the form of allusions, of reminiscences, of historic and biographic anecdote, is not simply that of literary history, it is that of literature itself.

This minute learning is based on an extraordinary intellectual sensitiveness to the elements of growth and decay in the composition of society. "Thirty years," he says, "are a long time in the life of a nation, long enough to produce a modification of the moral atmosphere."<sup>13</sup> For the study of literature by centuries and schools, he has substituted the study of it by moments and by individuals. He appears instinctively to feel not only the large rearrangements of masses which differentiate ages and centuries from each other, but all the finely graduated shadings and shiftings of tone, temper, and coloring, which, on minute inspection, are seen to distinguish the successive decades and lustra of each, the diverse habitats where this or that brief incarnation of the spirit of the times momentarily alighted and lodged. He distinguishes every star from every other star in magnitude, every group, coterie, camp, and *salon* from every other. He had no cheap scorn of the patient effort by which the treasures of the past are rescued from the disguises and distortions practiced on them by the injurious hand of time. Even here his point of view is humanistic rather than specifically literary, for he prizes more highly originality in the man than in the matter. And, alongside of genius, he values what is its surest source of replenishment and rejuvenation, serious study, "*la simple étude approfondie*."

"Whoever we may be, and whatever may be the kind of work to which choice or destiny has addressed us, let us aim at excellence, let us try sooner or later to achieve perfection in what is given us to do, and to exercise all our faculties at their highest potency, and since the hour and the accident of special grace and illumination by which we surpass ourselves is not in our power, let us hold ourselves

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<sup>13</sup> NL 10-283.

in readiness and show ourselves worthy of it by keeping it constantly in view. Study in itself, delving deep into its laborious furrows, produces in the end fruits for which posterity is grateful; is there not a glory also in the overflowing esteem accorded to scholars like Du Cange, Mabilion, and Tillemont? And as for those to whom it is given to clothe their thoughts with the lustre of style, and to imprint their work with a seal of imagination and of grandeur, do not believe that in general they have achieved this off-hand and without practicing a long and obstinate conquest within themselves. Montesquieu, while conceiving and producing the 'Esprit des Lois,' seemed as yet to many judicious contemporaries only a very clever man. Duclos, who remained to the end the same man that he had seemed in the beginning, has rather shrunk with time."<sup>14</sup>

"It is only the truly learned who have the right to speak disdainfully of learning," says Sainte-Beuve, modestly disclaiming his own title to be ranked among the scholars. Is his modesty perhaps a little disdainful? He inclines always in speaking of the learned to admit their caste prejudices and to treat them as a sort of mandarins or Brahmins, a race set apart, sanctified specialists and lordly depositaries of the "facts," to whom we owe an awe-struck homage. But he makes it abundantly plain that he yields them this homage only as the bankers of the world's treasures of knowledge. The learned have, it must be confessed, tended at all times to justify this somewhat narrow conception of the limits of their rôle by their too exclusive worship of the fact, and by their savage ostracism of even the most just man who treats the fact imaginatively. Why is the man who cultivates taste, imagination, and a sense of proportion—a man whose knowledge is broadly humane rather than specialized,—regularly denied the honorable qualification of *learned* by the professional scholar? Is it because the scholar is so commonly lacking in these qualities, that he clings with such jealous exclusiveness to the single one that he can justly claim? Or is it because taste can be culti-

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<sup>14</sup> CL 9-244.



vated, as Goethe tells us, only by daily contact with what is truly excellent, because critical judgment is the fruit of habitual reflection on the facts one has learned, and because imagination is fed by a free and leisurely appropriation of what is significant in them, all things which decidedly limit and even discountenance purely quantitative acquisition of the erudite order, as most scholars practice it? If learning is reduced to proportional representation in the worshipper of proportion, let us, when it is duly present in a finely balanced mind and when it serves its proper function in a symmetric concert of faculties, not churlishly deny it because it does not run to a fantastic plethora of bulk and thews. Let us call learned not only such an exceptional prodigy as Sainte-Beuve, but also those humbler men of taste and sense who, when they interpret the facts, do not show themselves inadequately provided with facts to interpret. And conversely, let us not over-estimate the learning of those seemingly hyper-learned scholars, who so laboriously collect all the facts that cluster around some infinitesimal atom of debatable lore, and who, for want of larger knowledge, are unable to interpret its relations to anything outside itself. In discussing the indiscreet eulogies which the mediævalist Paulin Paris bestowed on the "*Chanson de Roland*," which he found Homeric, Sainte-Beuve denies the propriety of the epithet and suggests that such aberrations of judgment would be impossible to one imbued with Homer in the original Greek. The defect in the armor of these mediæval scholars, he finds, is that they do not possess the proper terms of comparison.

Yet Sainte-Beuve himself is not altogether satisfactory in dealing with the issue here involved. He inclines too much to treat it as a problem of taste. Arnold is sounder in viewing it as a question of ultimate principle, as a clash between science and literature. Sainte-Beuve says that when he heard argued the question of the classics versus science in education, his heart was on the one side and his reason on the other. The push of curiosity is strong enough in him to balance his humanistic sympathies, and he cannot quite make up his mind to stand firmly against the trend



of his time and to say with Arnold that the humanities are first and science second. He remains always in some degree a naturalist, and as such he has at least a tinge of the great scientific superstition that was the religion of his age. Viewing the fantastic illusions and the wild and often sinister errors into which the most literary and the most philosophic minds are prone to plunge along with the untutored many, he feels that the only remedy against a perpetual intellectual nonage is science, the science of nature. A true realist, he prefers scientific knowledge, with its rigid limitations, to abstract thought with its boundless freedom. There is in him something of the spirit of Lucretius. "What idea," he asks, "did Boileau or Racine have of the world, of the thunder, the stars, the planets? I dare not venture to answer this question, out of respect for these great geniuses." He recoils with a very modern horror from the vision of great wits and poets living in the haze of antiquated superstitions. He is here paying undue tribute to the *Zeitgeist*. Did not Saint Cosmas achieve sanctity, although he believed that the earth was a flat parallelogram twice as long as it was broad?

True to his lode-star, curiosity, Sainte-Beuve has more confidence in knowledge than in wisdom as the means of intellectual liberty. He half inclined to believe, with his age, that progress lay rather in emancipation from errors of thought, from untenable theologies and nebulous philosophies, than in the insight into life which the wise man extracts from experience and self-study in all ages and under any conditions of culture. Sainte-Beuve was, in his fundamental thought, a disciple of the materialistic eighteenth century, and aspired to be, what he eulogizes Littré for being, "one of that élite, of that conscientious and meritorious school, few in all ages, but gradually growing in numbers, of naturalistic philosophers who tend to introduce and to make prevail in all things the methods and the results of science, and who, themselves intellectually emancipated, strive little by little and more perhaps than is really possible, to emancipate humanity from illusions, from vague

disputations, from vain solutions, from idols, and from the empire of chimeras.”<sup>15</sup> He fancies the great scientist to be as frequently and as intensely in touch with the sublimities which are the soul of science as with the minutiae which are its body, whereas for most scientists the infinite begins precisely where science ends. We suppose them in perpetual communion with the universe—when the chances are a hundred to one that they are studying the abdominal parasites of the white ant. When we consider the frequent indifference of the scientist for that larger whole of which science is a part, *la pensée morale et civilisatrice*, Sainte-Beuve seems not sufficiently mindful of the supreme spiritual dignity of the great men of thought and of the great interpreters of human nature. “In comparison with these systems so profound, so rigorous, so interdependent, so full of eternal truth, which occupy the mind of a Newton or a Laplace, what are our feeble and precarious observations, our subtle and tenuous flashes of intellect . . . things no sooner born than vanished?”<sup>16</sup> “It has always seemed to me,” he says again, “that the highest rank in the purely intellectual hierarchy belongs to such men as Archimedes, Newton, or Lagrange. To understand them and to read them is already a great and noble thing and the most accomplished act of the mind.”<sup>17</sup> One may doubt it, when one recalls Newton and the fantastic hypotheses he entertained regarding the infinite, or Laplace, who “had no need of that hypothesis,” and whom Napoleon had to relieve of administrative duties because he carried into affairs, to cite the Emperor’s own words, *l’esprit des infiniment petits*. Darwin’s thought recoiled before the infinite, and when Cuvier or Pasteur wished to approach it, they Platonized.

When, however, science confronts Sainte-Beuve in the very citadel of literature, he sounds the tocsin. Speaking of Cousin’s influence in philologizing literary study, he says: “M. Cousin, who so splendidly opened this vein, deserved to be followed with ardor. A considerable number of his

<sup>15</sup> NL 5-256.

<sup>16</sup> NL 2-93.

<sup>17</sup> CL 10-2.

disciples are pushing the work in the same direction, and some of them with success. The old-fashioned academic eulogy has been dethroned; it has decidedly yielded to the erudite article, to the dissertation, and to the almost grammatical dissection of authors. I shall take the liberty, however, in indicating this new vein and in felicitating its discoverer, to point out the objection that might attach to it. The danger might arise, if one should exploit it too unreservedly, of allowing the critic to dispense with views and ideas and especially with talent. The flaunting of some hitherto unpublished document might exempt the finder from showing himself possessed of taste. The critical remark, that winged word, might run the risk of being stamped out by the document. It is all very well for M. Cousin to give a new value to the unpublished matter that he discovers, to the least philosophic or literary remains that he unearths; he sets them in a frame of gold. But after him, alongside of him, how will this growing tendency shape itself? As long as the master is here I have no fears, and as long as I can read him I fall under the charm; but I view his disciples with apprehension. Is it possible that the age of scholiasts is already begun in France, and that we are already directing our main effort to making up our inventory? That is a presentiment which I try in vain to banish. Yes, there are moments when I fear that the master, for all his magnificent style, may be setting up the columns of the Parthenon as a façade to a college of Byzantines.”<sup>18</sup>

This fear haunted Sainte-Beuve continually, and profoundly disturbed any precarious contentment he could find in the cult of science. Under the respect with which he speaks of its big promise, there always lurks a hint of suspicion, a suggestion of the delicate scruples of the man of taste who feels that in literary matters even a little taste is worth much learning, and who fears that the absorbing process by which the recondite fact is reached may, if it become a matter of daily routine, prove unpropitious to the finer processes by which one enters into the intimacy

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<sup>18</sup> CL 1-118.



of the poet and the artist. When someone extols some verses of the Jansenist de Saci and finds them charming, he exclaims: "No, they are not charming. When one has once made verses on Greek roots, one can do nothing charming in the way of poetry. Things purely literary, if treated in this [scientific] fashion, may at times suffer as if caught and crushed in a vise; I should now and then prefer a shrewd or sceptical ignorance moving at random in each study, awakening to it each day with fresh morning eyes, and renewing itself daily in the rejuvenating fountain of experience as if life were for ever beginning. In this unstrenuous and holiday mood one certainly gathers a richer crop of flowers."<sup>19</sup>

Again and again Sainte-Beuve points out the danger of over-erudite criticism, the danger of treating literature in an anti-literary spirit. He would have sympathized with the geologist Shaler, who, after hearing a lecture (to undergraduates) on Shakespeare, came out muttering: "Hem! Shakespeare couldn't score twenty-five per cent here on his knowledge of his own works!" "Let us not subtilize on our great writers," says Sainte-Beuve, "let us not imitate the scholars who dissect *ad nauseam* the Odes of Horace, saying: 'This is interpolated, and that is genuine.' What do they know about it? The best of them are led beyond bounds, and do not know where to stop."<sup>20</sup> The futile emendation of so many lines of Horace by Bentley, the arrogant rejection of so many by Peerlkamp, suggest that Sainte-Beuve's literary tact is at times more to be trusted than the indagations even of the greatest scholars. He also views with equal suspicion the awkward attempts of the merely learned to deal with the problems of literary criticism. When the originality of La Bruyère is questioned on the ground that he is not the *inventor* of the portrait, which can be traced back to the salon of a much earlier date, he sets this whole question of origins and influences on its true basis: "The originality of La Bruyère does not lie in having made portraits, haphazard, dashed off with a more or

<sup>19</sup> NL 5-243.

<sup>20</sup> NL 7-213.



less cursory pen, for social amusement, as was the practice before his day, but in making portraits, comprehensive, profound, ingenious, ordered, satirical, in a word, such as only a great painter could make. This originality, which is his own, no one can take away from La Bruyère."<sup>21</sup>

When, to cite another example, the question is raised whether Saint-Evremond or La Rochefoucauld was the first to express a certain idea, Sainte-Beuve, with proper irony for this favorite sport of the literary scholar, remarks that "between men of this stamp and natures of this quality questions of priority do not exist. It is to treat them too much as mere authors and to make oneself the advocate of a jealous susceptibility which they nowise felt. Did they merely hit upon the same idea? Was there a reminiscence on the part of one of them? Or a borrowing? Assuredly neither of them cared a straw: they were not so meticulous."<sup>22</sup> That is sound doctrine—for what is the utility of so many erudite inquiries as to which of two great men, both capable of saying far finer things, may have been the first to utter a commonplace one, which either of them would willingly have left to some third and lesser spirit to proclaim—unless one can be as profound a diviner as that amazing commentator who by retracing Shakespeare's *Go on: I'll follow*, back to Terence's *I prae, sequar*, proved beyond peradventure that the bard of Avon was after all as brave a Latiner as any of his fellows?

Evidently Sainte-Beuve is a friend to learning but an enemy to pedantry, an attitude unquestioningly endorsed by everybody—especially by those most guilty of confounding the two. Sainte-Beuve never tires of bringing out the distinction: "Every kind and branch of learning is guarded by surly watch-dogs; they have to be pacified, not by throwing them honey-cakes (beware of honey!), but by an offering of little dry stones. When they have digested a few of these stones, they become favorable and allow you to pass, even with your ideas and your treasure. Once past, you

<sup>21</sup> CL 14-21?.

<sup>22</sup> NL 13-440.

need pay no further heed to them but go on to join the clever people beyond."<sup>23</sup>

"The feeling for literary beauty—may I venture to say it?—seems to have suffered, or at least consents to remain silent and to abandon the field to erudite research, to historical minutiae, with the result that the study of the classics in our higher institutions and the literature issuing from our universities, in growing more and more substantial, have lost something of their old-time lustre and a great part of their influence on current literature, which is becoming more and more trifling. Such a separation is only natural in the present state of things: however, we ought not to let it widen into a divorce, and it is imperative that we should exert all our power in opposing it."<sup>24</sup> So when Sainte-Beuve finds the lightest of poets a prey in the hands of the heaviest of commentators, he protests: "Have we perhaps become less delicately sensitive in becoming more learned? Is it really necessary to suffer the methods of Gervinus in order to feel and admire La Fontaine? . . . In order to assign Gresset to his true rank, or to decide the degree of esteem due to an elegy of Parny, is it really indispensable that we should have passed in review all the various literatures, should have read the *Nibelungenlied*, and should know by heart the mystic stanzas of Calderon? Perhaps. It is, in any case, the longest road, and, when at last we return home, we run the risk of being thoroughly tired out and of going straight to sleep. Will not the simple fruit that we hoped to relish on our return hold little flavor for a jaded and disdainful palate?"<sup>25</sup> Even here, there are traces of wavering allegiance, if you will, but it is evident enough that Sainte-Beuve is speaking from the heart when in the same passage he says: "We are once more, in certain aspects, reverting to the scholastic, and the Gothic Middle-Ages are imposing themselves upon us, they are dominating us."

<sup>23</sup> PC 3-474.

<sup>24</sup> PC 5-330.

<sup>25</sup> CL 15-287-9.

Sainte-Beuve has not only diagnosed the disease from which literary study was already suffering in his day, and which has since increased a hundredfold, he has also pointed out the remedy in a page that has assuredly lost nothing of its appositeness:

“Oh, how long and leisurely, before making up one’s mind to write about any part of this noble century [that of Louis XIV], should be one’s preparation! From youth, from childhood even, one should have insensibly received a first general layer of knowledge relating to our old classic France and its fine and perspicuous language . . . One should have read Voltaire’s ‘Age of Louis XIV,’ and have learned by heart the multitude of splendid pages cited in our literary courses as honored monuments of taste. Then, little by little, on this first layer of literary knowledge, which we nowadays regard as superficial, and which at any rate used to be a light and delicate one, we should add by degrees more powerful and characteristic colorings and more expressive physiognomies; we should read that series of charming memoirs which formerly were a part of the education of every cultivated man or woman: Madame de Motteville, Mademoiselle de Montpensier, the Cardinal de Retz, Madame de La Fayette, Madame de Caylus, and all Madame de Sévigné: Saint-Simon, who already begins to jar a little, would only come in last after all the rest. All this would form the second general layer in which the mind would slowly impregnate itself; and it should be only on this background, prepared and developed at leisure, that we should finally fill in all that we owe to the successive researches of the Monmerqués and the Walkenaërs, and to the more recent and brilliantly capricious finds of M. Cousin. But let us not begin here! Let us not plume ourselves on being erudite even before we are simply well-informed—the great and hateful error of our age and the literary menace of the future. We should thus observe proportion and tone and propriety; we should not begin by plunging headlong into unpublished sources, before having read what has been in print for two centuries and what only yesterday was still



the ornament of every cultivated mind; we should not open relations with the seventeenth century by making 'discoveries,' and if we made any, we should enounce them in a manner more simple, more in keeping with the matter, more worthy of that seventeenth century itself; we should not give the lie to its spirit in the very act of discovering it, and we should not speak a language that would make the hair stand on end on the heads of these polite ancestors of whom we talk so glibly at every turn; we should not, in fine, in this unceremonious fashion lay hands on these gentlefolk of Versailles as if we hailed from Poissy or Pontoise.

"Does this image shock you? Let us shift our ground. We are like Romans of the fourth or fifth century who should come and hold forth with merciless prolixity, in African style, on missives found in the casket of Augustus, of Pollio, and of Mæcenas."<sup>26</sup>

No one would venture to question the absolute eminence of Sainte-Beuve as a master in the science of human nature. Yet Faguet paradoxically accuses him of having been without gift for reading the book of human nature in the living copies, of having been no observer of men! Sainte-Beuve's work refutes the charge at every turn. He had mingled with a thousand of his contemporaries, he mentions them at every turn in his essays, which are as much permeated by the spirit of the living world as by that of the world of letters. So far from having moved among them in vain, he has told us something significant or memorable of every one of the distinguished people he had known, often something so secret that they had hoped no discerning eye would pierce behind the veil.

In truth, Sainte-Beuve loved life as much as he loved literature. Society in its strictly social form, with its etiquette, with its public amiability and its private meanness, he never greatly relished. He preferred his study and his books, and during his last years he was even something of a hermit, one who had nowise renounced the world, though not unwilling to forget it during lengthening intervals. But

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<sup>26</sup> CL 14-265.



then and always he delighted in all that wealth of cultivated thought, of trained knowledge, and of refined sentiment, which is the product of a highly perfected social culture; and he still welcomed as warmly as ever that "security and amenity of intercourse and that infinite charm of conversation," which society, as he had known it at its best, had afforded him.

In his exquisite cult of letters he embraced sympathetically all those things of which literature is the quintessence and finer perfume. The warmer touch of social contact, the delight of sharing with a few select spirits a common enthusiasm, the more tenuous but decorative charm of the society of the salon, the lighter graces interwoven by woman's presence into the more substantial fabric of masculine intercourse, and, above all, the ideal of friendship, of an intimate blending of spirit with spirit in disinterested and delightful community of feeling, all this runs through his criticism at every period. It is the permanent background of his inner life, and, quite as much as his more particular critical gifts, imparts the peculiar zest and flavor that distinguish his pages from those of more conventional critics. His reader feels himself to be at every moment in the full stream of life and literature.

It is this extreme sensitiveness to the charm of social life that enabled him in his essay on Madame Récamier to write what is a genuine masterpiece in its kind. In the essay on Madame Swetchine, he has defined his own ideal of the salon, and at the same time the salon as he had himself known it, in the days of Madame Récamier, at the Abbaye-aux-Bois:

"A salon, for me, is a gathering presided over by a woman, young or old, it matters little, though it is better perhaps that she should not be so very young as to throw into the shade all those who surround her. The frequenters come there and return there with pleasure; they talk of all things, they talk in common of certain subjects which interest all, they do so with slight divergences and dissonances amid which the hostess, like the leader of an orchestra with-

out baton or gesture, artfully maintains or quickly reestablishes harmony. None of the great topics is under the ban, but liberty is intact as to each of them, for if once a conclusion were prescribed, if there were any fixed political or religious orthodoxy, any creed or taboo, any *nec plus ultra*, it would put an end to the free and charming variety of discussion which wanders at its own sweet will and which is inspired by the fire of contradiction with its most brilliant sallies and its involuntary transports. Some great athletes come there from time to time to contend in combats of wit; they enter the lists, they shine, and the rest listen and applaud, and soon each of the guests follows out the current of his own reflections in private developments, which, after the grand *arias*, make up a background of subdued notes. Neither ideas nor wit are ever pretermitted, and sentiment too finds its place, its appeal, and its play. A salon in which one cannot follow and overtake the woman that one singles out, divert her from the group that surrounds her, converse with her for a moment in an undertone in a quiet corner, or direct toward her across the current of the general conversation some special words in which one has brightened into sudden wit and which are rewarded with a knowing look—without all this a salon is no salon for me.”<sup>27</sup>

For the penetrating observer, however, under the smooth surface, so exquisitely subdued to the demands of art, there still lay the restless depths of human nature with all its weakness and passion: “In Madame Récamier’s salon, one could not quite escape paying tribute, one was constrained to a slight relaxation of taste, to a few over-indulgent judgments . . . One was likely, after listening to some of those delightful morning readings, to have to indite an article on Chateaubriand.”<sup>28</sup> This was the local god “to the foot of whose statue all were bound as with a golden chain.”<sup>29</sup> So much so, Sainte-Beuve mischievously says elsewhere, that Ampère ended by never writing anything with-

<sup>27</sup> NL 1-225.

<sup>28</sup> NL 1-230.

<sup>29</sup> CL 1-135.

out imbedding in it some eulogy for this spoiled god. "Madame Récamier," he adds, "asked us to be gracious, and in asking it she gave us some of her own grace." As an offset to this faint shadow in the picture, Sainte-Beuve tells us what Madame Récamier had done to form her young admirer: "Before he knew her he was impetuous, violent, it is said, hasty, choleric even, an unbridled enthusiast. She had softened his rough surfaces and endowed him with urbanity. She had, I believe, dimmed a little the sacred flame in him, but in return she had given him tact, taste, and that sense of the ridiculous which is perhaps the essence of good society."<sup>30</sup>

Even the local goddess does not altogether escape critical animadversion: "In playing with these human passions, on which she wished only to cast her spell, and which she irritated more than she supposed, she resembled the youngest of the Graces amusing herself by yoking lions to her chariot and teasing them. All the more imprudent because of her innocence, she loved danger, danger for others if not for herself." Sainte-Beuve's mood is still of the most amiable, he continues to shower roses on this queen of the salon, but in the showering of them he seems not wholly unwilling to draw just a drop of blood from her fair person as a tribute to his penetration and as an attestation that he is never the dupe of appearances, even when they come in the form of such "cordial friendliness in the midst of a little world so illusively beautiful." Later, under the spur of contradiction, a thing he never endured with patience, he bluntly calls Madame Récamier a coquette. He had lived so intimately in these social circles that he had seen every thread on either side of the tapestry. Extreme sensitiveness to whatever is charming carries with it an equal sensitiveness to whatever breaks the charm. "I love few pictures," says Joubert, "few operas, few statues, few poems, and yet I am a great lover of the arts." "I am more sensitive to certain outstanding faults than to a certain order of qualities," says Sainte-Beuve. This extreme sensitiveness

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<sup>30</sup> NL 13-211.



he carried with him into life as into literature—in fact, he is far more irritated by flaws in men than in books. His mind became in time an encyclopædia of all the minute observations that a painter of contemporary portraits could utilize. As a veracious painter, renouncing charity and sometimes even courtesy as well, he has utilized these to the utmost. He has painted, not godlike figures with their heads in the clouds, but full-length portraits of men with their virtues and their faults, *avec les verrues et la grimace*. Let others take Chateaubriand at his own valuation as a chivalrous defender of the faith; for Sainte-Beuve he is only “an Epicurean with a Catholic imagination,” a jealous deity enthroned in the salon of Madame Récamier, savagely chewing his scarf and muttering, *The great booby!* when Lamartine momentarily usurps the first place. But this disillusionment, or this severity, is not habitual and ingrained; it is rather a parenthetical interruption, a stolen whisper that carries into the enchantments of the dream a sharp reminder of reality. It is so little insistent that in most of the *Causeries* it is not met at all.

It is evident, through all his work, that literature is for Sainte-Beuve an orb that has two hemispheres: the literature which has a serious purpose, and that which is *agrément, douceur, oubli, pasetemps et délices*. He sacrifices neither to the other, and, what is more remarkable, he seems to prefer neither to the other. We should be unjust if we did not pause to note the same fine balance in his conception of the social world. He felt the whole charm of that society within society, all *agrément* and *douceur*, society civilized and embellished by woman, but he nowise lost sight of the larger and more masculine world where serious purpose prevails and where man's faculties are plied to the utmost. He deplores the monastic and unsocial education of Lamennais:

“It is not to know the world, to live to the age of thirty-two in rustic seclusion, with only one kind, and that narrow and severe, of relationships and of moral interests, and without having observed modern society in the infinite



diversity of its conditions and of its opinions, without having learned early in life to look squarely at our fellow-men in the wide range of their tastes, their aptitudes, their talents, and their merits, in the endless variety of their zeal and their ardor, in their indifference even, which would often be a kind of wisdom, were it more premeditated. Would Lamennais, inducted into this school of life at the formative period, have learned to be tolerant and indulgent? In any case, he would surely have sharpened and above all polished his talent; he would have learned to diversify it (of which he bethought himself only when it was too late). He would have blunted the edge of his pride; pride, Plato says, is the companion of solitude. He would have unlearned his monotonous trick of invective. And, in seeing the blunders and the faults into which even the best and the strongest fall, he might have been admonished not wholly to despise mediocrity itself."<sup>31</sup>

In this philosophic view of society as a school of experience, in which lessons of shrewdness, of tact, and of wisdom are the order of the day, Sainte-Beuve proves himself once more a serious moralist, just as in the select and brilliant society of the salon he shows himself a supreme connoisseur in those refined delights of the head and the heart which are the crowning grace of civilization in its festive and holiday mood. He is the historian of human nature in all its higher manifestations, the most loyal and discriminating painter of all the forms and developments of modern French culture.

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<sup>31</sup> NL 11-366.

### III

#### THE SCEPTIC

To understand things we must have been once in them and then have come out of them; so that first there must be captivity and then deliverance, illusion followed by disillusion, enthusiasm by disappointment. He who is still under the spell, and he who has never felt the spell, are equally incompetent.

—*Amiel*

Sainte-Beuve's is not the strong and simple nature in which all the faculties are bound together in a sheaf. To begin with, his intelligence is not of the simplifying order which boldly subordinates all minor issues to a major one so as to make purpose rather than range a prime characteristic. Such a simplifying process does violence to nature, which refuses to countenance the unity imposed on it by art. Sainte-Beuve has so keen a sense of the multiplicity of things that he instinctively recoils from submitting their endless variety to a law of grace that elects and reprobates and so sets itself above nature. Intellectually, he is a *naturaliste des esprits*, held in fascinated standstill before the metamorphoses that nature runs through, rather than a religious or a philosophic thinker imposing a cosmic and moral order on the infinite diversity that confronts him. This refusal to accept and reject led in the end to a questioning attitude, exceedingly hesitant and cautious, but never resigned and serene and Olympian, rather, a frustrated and melancholy scepticism.

What is evidently lacking in Sainte-Beuve is an abiding harmony between the intelligence and the will. His will is, in a world where we live and act ultimately by faith, too much given to waiting upon knowledge. Action is left to come, when it comes, from an impulse of sensibility seeming very like caprice, because Sainte-Beuve's sensibility is feminine and mobile and lacks the torrential power of roman-

tic passion. His nature is not romantic, it is only streaked with romanticism. His sensibilities are as romantic as his sceptical intelligence will allow them to be—they are romantic by fits and starts, only to turn round and view themselves in perspective and in profile, to analyze and understand themselves, and thus to achieve the semi-emancipation due to recognizing the dupery of passion even before one has exhausted its impulse. The concomitant of his hesitant and experimental scepticism, playing with all forms of thought, is a hesitant and experimental romanticism, playing with all forms of feeling, trying and discarding them in succession, running through the whole gamut of moods, from the sensual to the spiritual, with alternations of fervor and satiety, easily attached and still more easily detached, prone to change and a foe to constancy. The logical complement to the series of intellectual masters who complained of his mutability would have been—had he had his own way—a series of mistresses complaining of his fickle fantasies (if we accept the Amaury of “*Volupté*” as a veracious portrait).

Sensibilities, so temperate even in their excesses, so self-possessed even in their abandonments, were bound to relax the will more than they could seduce the intelligence. Hence results the peculiar combination that Sainte-Beuve offers: a lucid intelligence always emancipating itself from illusion, a semi-romantic heart playing with illusions that it is not ardent and impetuous enough to accept or masculine enough to dispense with, and a will that is mainly governed by those sensibilities which the intellect wholly comprehends and more than half despises. It is a nature in which the poet that we all carry in us is doomed gradually and grudgingly to give way to the critic that comes only with the years that bring the philosophic mind—and take away the poetic spirit.

Sainte-Beuve carries his intellectual wealth with the same modesty and unpretentious ease that he carries his learning. He speaks so quietly and insists so little that one half forgets that he is dealing with delicate, diversified,

and often thorny and controversial questions. His instinctive judgment is so quick and so sound that the ease of his manner hides the extreme complexity or elusiveness of the ideas that he develops. This is no doubt partly due to his notable intellectual caution. He avoids the insoluble riddles—they do not perhaps solicit him quite enough. It is in this cautiousness that he is most akin to his models Bayle and Montaigne. There is not a wilful paradox in his whole work. There is not a wilful sophism either. There is no trace of declamation in his style (though he lived in Hugo's day); there is no trace of the declamatory mood in his thought. It is sober and honest; it never aims at the hieratic and the oracular. The catchwords of the day, liberty in art, the divine voice of the people, the brotherhood of man, the law of progress, universal enlightenment, do not cast over him the fatal spell that they exercised over nearly all nineteenth-century thinkers. Sainte-Beuve examines their credentials and accepts them, if at all, only with due reservations. Others may exalt democratic enlightenment as a panacea for all social ills. Most moderns, like Hugo, believe that civilization is safe when every man reads the daily paper. Sainte-Beuve says: "The newspaper is our glory and our shame . . . It is the great problem of modern civilization."<sup>1</sup> Others may treat politics as matter of pure theory; Sainte-Beuve sees here too the conflicting play of human forces: "I can conceive of no exact solution of political questions unless we take into account this practical and precise consideration: *men being what they are* . . ."<sup>2</sup> We all say of a prodigal writer: He will write himself out. Sainte-Beuve, with his shrewd good-sense, retorts: "That is to talk of genius as if it were a bag, as if it were not rather a bubbling fountain which perpetually renews itself in pouring itself forth. One may say of all true genius as of love: it is a great recommencement."<sup>3</sup>

He is an extremely detached and tolerant thinker, open to many forms of thought and committed to the very fewest.

<sup>1</sup> PC 3-459.

<sup>2</sup> CL 14-362.

<sup>3</sup> NL 9-43.



"For no consideration, even if I could do so, would I take away from mankind a useful dogma or even a consolatory illusion."<sup>4</sup> He has no polemic ardors and propagates no system of his own. There are no preliminaries to his criticism that one must accept in order to find his guidance satisfactory. His thought adapts itself to the matter; it does not, like Taine's, adapt the matter to itself. It is so loath to assume fixed form that at times it suffers the flux and reflux of mood to govern it. He says of the Terrorists: "As for me, I confess, I always shudder when I have to pronounce an opinion on these men, and, even when I speak severely, I ask myself if I have the right to be severe. No one, in truth, knows himself if he has not passed through similar ordeals."<sup>5</sup> The mood is, one cannot but feel, too humble. We are nearer to the fundamental Sainte-Beuve, however, when he says: "We have become too much accustomed, in our day, on the faith of historians who enervate and romanticize history, to treat these men of terror and hatred as fellowmen, as human beings, and to admit them into the circle of ordinary and even familiar comparisons."<sup>6</sup> Such wide variations of judgment can only be possible in one who cares more for fluid liberty than for fixed convictions. On this side Sainte-Beuve is closely related to the pure impressionists of a later date.

Fixed convictions and some sort of intellectual centre are indispensable for constructive thought. Sainte-Beuve has a critical, not a constructive, mind. This is evident in his metamorphoses, his speedy acceptance and his speedy rejection of so many modes of thought, like garments which he puts on with the half-conscious intention of putting them off again when the next hour has struck on the clock of time. A truly creative intellect is too much shaped by pressure from within to be so plastic to influences from without. It pleads *pro domo*, and is not capable of this continuous detachment. Tolerance is based either on indifference, or on strenuous effort to comprehend. It cost Sainte-Beuve

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<sup>4</sup> NL 1-249.

<sup>5</sup> NL 1-364.

<sup>6</sup> CL 14-54 (note).

only the very slightest effort to understand, to tolerate, and even to relish, modes of thought that were wholly foreign to him. When he showed marked hostility it was not because of theoretical differences but of practical inconveniences. His denunciation of *la lèpre cléricale* in his last years was no doubt mainly due to the unfortunate influence of the Church in practical politics; he suffered from obscurantist critics like Pontmartin and Veuillot. He is the "universal doctor"—without doctrine—reflecting all ideas and clinging to none. He is not, therefore, like Arnold or Brunetière, an educator who furnishes us with a discipline, but he is an incomparable initiator who opens the mind to all forms of doctrine—and of practice.

Whether we will or no, our image of the ideal is bound to reflect our practice. Sainte-Beuve lived the life of a man of letters, and he was a humanist in an age when humanists are rare. He sought his happiness in letters alone, and for them he renounced the material rewards and satisfactions that literature, less disinterestedly pursued, may be made to yield. Yet as a humanist, when he gives expression to his fundamental self, he is a thorough-going though a refined epicurean. The same temper that makes him a naturalist when he falls back on his own native fund of philosophy, gives an epicurean tone to his humanism. A sceptical curiosity, seeking, through detachment from all particular forms, conventional affiliations, and vested interests, to let the whole stream of possible thought and sensation flow without let or hindrance through its channels, that is his conception of humanism. We ask what relation all this activity has to action—and on that vital question Sainte-Beuve has very little to say, and that little, though generally decorous and even dignified, is not in any higher sense stimulating or edifying. This cosmopolitan has no definite home of his own in the world of thought, and he has no home functions and duties. We find no *critique de combat* in Sainte-Beuve, no ample and detailed solutions for contemporary problems. He views the human struggle with the mingled curiosity and detachment of a Quaker who finds himself afloat in a man-of-war. Sainte-

Beuve, it is true, is fond of reminding us that things, in proportion as they are precious, are only gained and only retained by perpetual combat. Yet his humanism, in spite of the modernness of his ideas, is a little too unconcernedly retrospective and irresponsible in its exquisite Atticism.

"Let us try to reconstruct the image of such friends of Racine or Fénelon as Monsieur de Tréville and Monsieur de Valincour, of one of those cultivated men who did not aim at being authors, but were content to read, to be connoisseurs in whatever is beautiful, to live and move among such things while remaining exquisite amateurs and accomplished humanists. For it was possible to be a humanist in those days, and in ours it is almost impossible. To be a humanist was to confine oneself to reading the ancients, or, among the moderns, those who appeared worthy, at their best, to be compared with the ancients; it was to be so initiated, so penetrated, so impregnated, that one could at every moment, thanks to this intimacy of knowledge, discover in them new delicacy and new beauty. As pious admirers and worshippers of these antique masters . . . we might indeed have exclaimed with that learned German [Creuzer]: 'There remains but one thing for us moderns to do, to love them.' And we might cry with Goethe: 'To neglect these old models, Aeschylus and Homer, is to die.'"<sup>7</sup>

Sainte-Beuve regrets that, in these meticulously scholarly days, it is no longer possible to be a leisurely humanist of this sort. In the days of Homer or Aeschylus, those days of strenuous and heroic action, it was even less possible. The epitaph of Aeschylus commemorates his heroism, but makes no mention of his plays. In Sainte-Beuve's world of amateurs and of connoisseurs, heroism and chivalry could be only ornamental. "Each man has his rôle and his passion: this emperor wishes to die standing erect; this soldier wishes to die wrapped in the folds of his flag; Paillet begs to be buried in his lawyer's gown. Let us respect these notions of honor . . . An excess of philosophy may indeed in the end engender too much indifference."<sup>8</sup> Sainte-

<sup>7</sup> NL 13-297.

<sup>8</sup> NL 13-420.



Beuve had not too much philosophy to admire, but he had too much philosophy to emulate, these fools of honor. There is little place in his world for those who, like Hotspur, would pluck bright honor from the pale-faced moon. For Sainte-Beuve such figures are but a part—though a spirit-stirring part—of the great spectacle which he so curiously contemplates but takes so little share in.

This attitude of aloofness, this distrust of all soaring speculation, may seem to be in contradiction with that love of truth above all things else that has been rightly set down as Sainte-Beuve's central characteristic. Any serious study of his work reveals the fact that he made a distinct choice between two kinds of truth. He is sceptical of all absolute truth, of all approaches toward it, of the graceful guesswork of Plato as of the chimeras of M. Pierre Leroux, who "wallowed in ideas like a bull in a bog."<sup>9</sup> To more transcendental minds Sainte-Beuve seems not so much a lover of truth as a naturalistic realist. He is a philosopher, in the same way as he finds Frederick the Great a philosopher, "by taste, by good sense, and because he reduced all things to the exact reality." As such, he distrusted utterly the metaphysical view of things, "those vague and vain expressions, those abstract metaphors that give an appearance of reality to what is only subtilized and nebulous logomachy."<sup>10</sup> He agrees with Sieyès that our language is more cunning than our ideas; and he quotes with sceptical delectation the story of Saint Anselm, who, when at death's door, longed for just a little increase of his mortal span so that he might solve the question of the origin of the soul, especially as he feared that, he being gone, no one else might be able to solve it.<sup>11</sup> Sainte-Beuve, without at all sharing the self-confidence of the saint, shares to the full his distrust of the powers of all his successors, from the schoolmen to the Hegelians.

What he does not abound in, what he comes very near to excluding from his work, is the intellectual ramifications that a book may suggest to philosophic minds intent on

<sup>9</sup> Olivier, 282.

<sup>10</sup> CL 6-375.

<sup>11</sup> CL 6-374.



fitting its special utterances into the general chorus of thought. He confines himself to such ideas as, in good logic, must needs be deduced from the book. When the critic imposes his own systematic ideas, however ingenious, upon an author, Sainte-Beuve protests. He objects to Taine's over-ingenuous study of La Fontaine:

"There is a too crying discord between the critic's procedure and the amiable mood which the poet inspires. Who would be the first to be astonished to hear such explanation and commentary? The poet himself! One day when before a canvas of Raphael one of our modern painters, a great aesthetician even more than a painter, a man full of vast ideas and of grandiose views, had developed before some pupils one of his theories on Christian art and on the art of the Renaissance, in which the name of Raphael repeatedly served as a pretext, he suddenly turned round, as he was departing, and like a true man of wit cried out: 'And to think that if Raphael had heard us, he would not have understood one word of this!' I should not wish that such a thing could ever be said of the author or the artist that one discusses, even after centuries have passed."<sup>12</sup>

Sainte-Beuve is superlatively cautious, though living in an age when the whole trend was in the direction of bold, and even reckless, speculation—bold and reckless even when philosophy was harnessed in the traces alongside of science. He treats all comers hospitably, but with a non-committal hospitality, as of one worldly-wise who knows that the friends of today may be the foes of tomorrow. The most graceful flights of the most winged spirits may rouse his wonder and his admiration; they cannot seduce him to imitate the example or to forget—what is his firmest theory—that man is a pedestrian creature, and that all departures from this law are only audacious intellectual acrobatics as incapable of escaping its inexorable limits as is prestidigitation of defying physics. He is a guide who does not take us on remote excursions, but who moves with absolute surety in his own territory; at its confines, he is

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<sup>12</sup> CL 13-257.

content to look toward what lies beyond, but he does so with his finger on his lips. "Why be so eager to translate one's impressions into written notes, and these notes themselves into laws?" he warningly exclaims in his amazement at Taine's eagerness to impose his logic on the fortuitousness of life. He is positive and realistic in temper, and founds his views on the irrefragable fact, on whatever has tradition and experience on its side. Renan, for example, a speculator with too much sweep of wing to submit to such barriers, regrets that France did not, like Germany, become half Protestant and half Catholic, and so profit by the stimulation, moral and intellectual, which two churches, living as rivals side by side, give to one another. Sainte-Beuve takes the ground that every nation has its own temperament, and he prefers France as it is, divided between Catholicism and free-thought.<sup>13</sup> That, at least, is to accept the fact and refuse to indulge the dream of what is not. Sainte-Beuve is on this side more nearly related to Goethe. "Note well," says Sainte-Beuve, "that if Goethe does not like poetry without a solid basis of reality, *des poésies en l'air*, he does not like ideas without a solid basis of reality any better. All that he has thought is in regard to something definite in a determined case." No cloudiness—that is the common virtue of both Goethe and Sainte-Beuve. But Goethe is the greatest critic of the modern mind because, this side of the clouds, he had boundless wealth of both general and particular ideas. Sainte-Beuve is a master only in dealing with particular ideas. Goethe craved, in a way that Sainte-Beuve did not, wholeness of vision; he had a philosophic mind. He was therefore fascinated by Spinoza. Not so Sainte-Beuve. "Spinozism is something much too fine for me, and much too artificially complicated. I have habitually less grand ideas of man, and I see in him only one of the innumerable accidents in the varieties of life, a very fugitive and transitory result, a momentary apparition (though the moment should last a few million years). He is, in Pindar's words, the dream of a

<sup>13</sup> NL 9-266.

shadow.”<sup>14</sup> Sainte-Beuve may be summed up as a scientific intelligence in the service of a literary temperament.

But everything has its price. One wishes at times that this exemplary prudence did not seem such near neighbor to timidity, and this temperance to impotence. There are some speculations, however inconclusive, which do honor to the intellect, and some gropings, however tentative, which do honor to the spirit. One wishes sometimes for a more determinate background against which to measure some of Sainte-Beuve's literary impressions, and for more spiritual firmness to irradiate and vitalize his moral ones. Ideas have atmosphere and tone, even independently of their truth, and, where knowledge fails, half of inspiration derives from hope. Sainte-Beuve felt this limitation very keenly. His tremulous approach in his earlier years to so many more or less spiritualistic forms of thought proves his restlessness. Intellectually he remained of the Lucretian school, however protestingly. Yet he continues to associate the sublimities of thought and conduct with the religion he had outgrown rather than with the philosophy he had espoused. It is here that he finds the central defect of Voltaire: "His Muse was in reality of too libertine a nature to admit of his words having any lasting effusion of the sacred fire. He lacked something of the flame of Bossuet, not to speak of Pindar. Gravity, authority of accent and doctrine, a belief in immortality accepted and living in the heart, drawn from a fountain of faith . . . all this Voltaire lacked."<sup>15</sup> Sainte-Beuve lacked it also, but, unlike Voltaire, he deeply felt and missed the power of what he lacked. Even in his last period he still pays tribute to religion as the only satisfactory guide in life and the only abiding fountain of hope.<sup>16</sup>

This scepticism of general ideas is naturally enough accompanied by a profound distrust of metaphysics and a deep-seated dislike of metaphysicians. Sainte-Beuve belongs to a different and a hostile family. Just as he rejects every

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<sup>14</sup> Corr. 2-333.

<sup>15</sup> CL 12-428.

<sup>16</sup> CL 13-207.



philosophy on the ground that the experiences of the outer life cannot be systematized, because chance plays the chief rôle, so he rejects all philosophies of the individual on the ground that the experiences of the inner life cannot be systematized, because chance, that individual chance which we call temperament, plays not only the chief rôle but perhaps the only rôle. Once one is endowed with such an invincible sense of the individual reality as Sainte-Beuve possessed, all attempts to merge it in an absolute unity must needs seem false. All attempts to capture the absolute truth and to imprison it in formulas seemed to such a spirit efforts to dialogue with the air and to bottle the wind. Even the greatest names in philosophy inspire him with little reverence. He omits them from his gallery of portraits. His allusions to them are infrequent and perfunctory. Their systems he seems to know only very superficially. An enemy would say that he lacked philosophic initiation. Let us rather say that his homage to reality was excessive. "Philosophers on a basis of pure nature, and of the family of Gil Blas, appeal to me, and serve as a diversion after those other metaphysical and superior philosophers who exhaust themselves in reasoning on cause and substance, on the ego and the non-ego." That is not exactly reverent. And how remote we are from Taine, who hailed Sainte-Beuve as his master! Sainte-Beuve, in moments of naturalistic enthusiasm, set down his portraits as monographs that might serve later toward building up a scientific philosophy of human nature; but we may be sure that, even had he lived a hundred generations later, this unremitting student of the individual monad would still have busied himself with writing monographs—and would have felt that the science of human nature was as far off as ever, or even farther!

How indeed could there be a science of human nature for one who so utterly rejected the kindred science of psychology? Yet, except for a few subtle notions, psychology, according to Sainte-Beuve, "can serve only the solitary contemplator and remains intransmissible. Every man must begin it all over again. The psychologist is like the



fisherman who remains immobile for hours in some quiet nook on the bank of a softly gliding stream. He views his image in the water, and perceives a thousand shadings peculiar to his own face. His illusion is the fancy that he can get beyond this; for, if he tries to pull the fish out of the water, if he moves his line, since the fish is his own image—is himself—at the slightest disturbance all grows turbid, the prey disappears, and the intangible phenomenon is there no longer.”<sup>17</sup>

“I am always tempted to look askance,” he says, “at this logical method, at that of Condillac in particular . . . One aimed in the first place to define everything, to reduce the problem to its clearest and most precise terms, to identify ideas and their signs, and then to proceed to reason literally; one simplified everything in order better to analyze everything, whereas in reality things grow on our hands and are incessantly complicated by passions, interests, and secret intentions. Thus the logical conclusion was in contradiction to the outcome of actual events.”<sup>18</sup>

That is Sainte-Beuve’s attitude toward speculators who, as regards their conclusions, are most nearly of his own way of thinking. For more transcendental and *a priori* philosophy he has even less sympathy. In the person of a very unpretending Catholic poet, Victor de Laprade, he leads to the slaughter the collective offspring of Plato through the ages down to his own day. This poet had said, in the grand old-fashioned manner, that the object of art is to make God manifest to man. “Is it true? Is it false?” tartly demands the critic, “I am sure I don’t know! at such giddy heights, we are among the clouds. Monsieur de Laprade, like most people who take it into their heads to be metaphysical, is substituting words for ideas, and is reasoning with specious terms that are vacuous or vague. He sets the world of pure ideas on one side and that of palpable forms on the other; he condescends to enter the latter only with reluctance. He deals in aerial and formless conceptions; understand who can!”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> PL 1-305 (note).

<sup>18</sup> PC 4-289.

<sup>19</sup> NL 1-12.

The opposition between these modes of thought is for Sainte-Beuve irreconcilable. There is no common ground between the realistic method which begins and ends in the infinite variety of human nature, and the generalizing method which is carried on by abstracters of quintessences in an atmosphere of pure intellect, from which man as he exists with all his accidents has been sedulously eliminated. After passing in review the contradictory interpretations of the career and influence of the metaphysician Maine de Biran, whose *Journal* had just been published, Sainte-Beuve says: "The truth is that we now know one man more, but the question has not advanced one step. . . . Poor Maine de Biran, always in quest of a solid footing which he never succeeded in finding, is now become what he never dreamed of being, a guide in philosophic certitude, a founder."<sup>20</sup> Even Descartes, one of the greatest founders in the history of modern philosophy, Sainte-Beuve does not much value as such. He finds that Descartes has barely taken three steps into the inner mystery of man's nature, when, despite all his precautions, he already assumes as evident things which the great majority of sensible men call in question. Neither Pascal nor Descartes can grasp "the diverse and ever-changing apparition of the incomprehensible truth."<sup>21</sup> He values Descartes as an intellectual liberator. "I do not know if Descartes has really founded a philosophy, and although his pretended disciples so assert, I have my doubts; but I know very well that he swept away the last restraints that scholasticism imposed on the human mind, and there lies his glory."<sup>22</sup> This is a somewhat pale and negative glory. It is not that to which those great thinkers aspired who regarded philosophic speculation as the noblest exercise of the human spirit. When Mignet identifies the honor of society and civilization with philosophy, and identifies progress itself with the progress of ideas, Sainte-Beuve rejoins:

"You always talk of thought, but of what thought? Is it of thought applied to science, history, language, and

<sup>20</sup> CL 13-322.

<sup>21</sup> PR 3-423 (note).

<sup>22</sup> CL 5-204.

learning? No, you answer: I speak of thought applied to the great problems of destiny, to the faculties of our nature, I speak of thought applied to itself. Here I interrupt you once more, and I cannot admit that this kind of application and study has ever been the measure of the moral strength of societies or of the vigor of civilization; for such philosophy touches very close on sophistry. Bossuet, in his 'Discourse on Universal History,' after enumerating the principal philosophic schools of Greece, those of Plato, of Aristotle, of Zeno, of Epicurus, adds, in passing over brusquely to the Romans: 'The Romans had at the same period a different sort of philosophy, which did not consist in disputing and discoursing, but in frugality, in poverty, in the toil of rustic life or of war, in which they placed their glory and that of their native land and of the Roman name; and it was this which finally made them masters of Italy and of Carthage.'"<sup>23</sup>

A few decades after Sainte-Beuve's day, Brunetière roused the echoes by loudly proclaiming the bankruptcy of science. Sainte-Beuve is here very quietly hinting the bankruptcy of philosophy. The most subtle of men, he hates subtleties and refuses to subtilize. "One cannot analyze the causes of laughter," he says (not foreseeing Bergson). And what he says of laughter he would as willingly have said of every other human emotion.

After the age of forty he is colder toward these philosophic raids into the realm of chaos and old night than he had shown himself during the preceding decade. For a few years he had indulged a livelier movement of speculative thought than he admitted later. Renouncing the absolute, he had not yet consented to be wholly confined in the relative. He still turned from time to time toward large, if no longer toward absolute, ideas. He indulged, though very sparingly, in those generalizations that aim to order the territory of thought, alongside of those minor truths of detail that only add so many more atoms to the cumbrous mass of verified fact. This is a transitional period for

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<sup>23</sup> CL 8-295.



Sainte-Beuve. He emerges from it the incomparable master of that art of literary miniature that lends such lifelike color to all the phases of the past and such glowing animation to its procession of actors—but we renounce, as he himself renounced, the hope of finding any common bonds that shall give to these random images a larger and more permanent significance than that of mere fleeting apparitions on the stage of history.

Such a gift, intellectually considered, is no doubt secondary. There are minds that lead others and there are minds that follow others. But the higher store we set on original thought should not render us unjust to the purely critical intelligence. The multiply and sinuous approaches, circle within circle, by which Sainte-Beuve patiently insinuates himself into the penetralia of such a mind as Montaigne's or Pascal's, the separation fibre by fibre of the positive and negative elements of such personalities, the delicate intellectual sensitiveness that is alone adequate to this task, all this is rare enough assuredly, and implies, in addition to a peculiarly lucid intelligence, a luminous cooperation of the imagination and the emotions. If it is less spectacular than the higher flights of the creative thinker, it is far more humanly appealing, because it mimics so dramatically the ebb and flow of thought in the living being. It is also perhaps a rarer gift. Usually a mind of such real distinction as Sainte-Beuve's insists on trading on its own fund, and has not the self-denial required for such loyal subordination of itself to the absolute comprehension of other minds. Intellectually Sainte-Beuve has been the model of critics because he has, so to speak, renounced himself to live for others. His thought confined itself to the visible world, to that select and highly civilized little world within the larger one, the world as he saw it from his Parisian observatory. The sky that vaults it hangs too low and is too contracted to offer the vast span that belongs to that of Renan, it is less spangled and radiant with stardust; it is less over-arching than that of Taine, less splendidly streaked and torn with flying meteorites.



His world is not, like those of his great rivals, "a chaos of clear ideas," or a clearing-house of chaotic ones, but it is more ordered and more durable than theirs. It is a cosmos of which every tract has been explored and charted, in which humanizing influences have permeated every nook and corner, and in which one may travel with a delightful feeling of security.

What there is of religious tincture in Sainte-Beuve's thought is largely due to this faculty for sympathetic appropriation from others. He was not one of the rare spirits who are capable of religion, nor was he one of the many who are content to dispense with it altogether. He is drawn toward it but not into it. That is why his pious poetry in the "Consolations" seems at the same time sincere yet ambiguous, and remains religiously sterile. It is addressed to an experience that lay before him and not behind him, and that was never to be realized. That is why the "Consolations" seem to one critic to come from the head and to another to come from the heart. In truth they come from both, but in a somewhat equivocal fashion. It was love that brought the poet to the altar, and it was the *taedium vitae*, which has so often been mistaken for a genuine religious vocation, that made the "illimitable desert of the heart" seem so thirsty for the saving waters. In a word, he wished to absorb religion, not to be absorbed by it; his heart was partly filled by love and his head was partly filled by eighteenth-century philosophy. He attempted to install religion in the left-over spaces. He owed to his early training, and to a temperamental bias also, a deep-seated sympathy for certain sides of Catholicism—like so many Frenchmen who remain vaguely Catholic after ceasing to be Christian. Even in his latest phase of lively anti-clericalism, something of the old predilection still appears. In his earlier period, when he was under distinctly religious influences, his approaches brought him much nearer to the Christian faith—just how near it is impossible to say\* He himself seems unable to do so: his reports are

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\* Chateaubriand's conversion is not questioned; that of Sainte-Beuve does not seem to me any more contestable. Whether long-lasting or not, it appears to me even more serious and more profound. H. Brémond: *Pour le Romantisme*, p. 220.

various and contradictory. How much is irresistible attraction, how much is the frowardness of curiosity? What would be insincerity in some, is often in Sainte-Beuve feeling cooling into analysis and questioning itself.

His religiosity is a part of his tribute to romanticism. In his more exalted mood he conceives religion more mystically and poetically than philosophically. Plato and Aristotle count for almost nothing here. He dislikes the severe logic of philosophy and is little attracted by its conclusions, even by such as he holds fast to; he is charmed by the wilder logic of mysticism and is profoundly attracted by its conclusions, even by such as he rejects, and these are nearly all of them. Sentimentally, he leans toward the saintly ideal which yearns for the ecstasies of austerity and of self-annihilation. In his less exalted mood, when his more fundamental instincts speak, he conceives religion in a fashion that reveals even more plainly the ultimately poetic character of his pious yearnings. His piety craves atmosphere, accessories, material incentives, the rural beauty of a hermitage, the soothing anodynes of nature, saintly comradeship amid monastic monuments, in short a romantic setting—for austere self-conquest! It is not a saint that is dreaming for a moment of poetry; it is a poet that is dreaming for a moment of sainthood. We may repeat here what he says of one of his Port-Royal saints, Monsieur d'Andilly: "The saints find it very difficult, even in turning hermits, not to carry with them in spite of themselves their secret little demon . . . To begin with, this mode of life, half given up to study and half to gardening, was certainly not very austere; the soothed senses found in it a special charm. What have we here but the old man of Virgil, the farmer by the Galesus, in a Christian setting? It is a pastoral Melibœus at Port-Royal, who might, without irony, repeat to himself the verse:

*Insere nunc, Melibœe, puros; pone ordine vites.*"<sup>24</sup>

The ultimately romantic nature of Sainte-Beuve's conception of religion is revealed in his readiness to connect the

<sup>24</sup> PR 2-261.

religious life with the emotions rather than with the will. He is capable of asserting that the starting-point of such giants of will as he paints at Port-Royal is identical with the unrestrained emotionalism of such victims of passion as George Sand in her wildest moods of revolt!

"Two hundred years later what, we may ask, would, according to human and calculable chances, have become of such natures as we see shining for a moment on the threshold of the cloister only to be presently confined and buried forever within it? How far would not this inborn revery, which here finds at once its bed to flow in and its predetermined course, have overflowed? What a torrent! Those feelings which so soon were fixed in prayer and practice and in obscure duties, into what shining and wind-torn vapors would they not have been blown! In a literary way, all that we meet in Sister Anne-Eugénie of exalted piety put to daily uses is the very substance from which are engendered poetic melancholy and the vague cry of the passions; from which the sister of René is born; from which will issue, amid burning flames that soar in air so high and so scattered and which some call incendiary blasts, the authoress of *Lélia*. *Lélia* is perhaps only a Sister Anne-Eugénie who has not remained in the cloister. We very clearly detect, at Port-Royal, beneath the piety that already analyzes and rehearses itself, the very thing which, in our day when the religious sanction has failed, becomes nothing more nor less than erring human love and restless and unappeased pride unceasingly analyzing and describing itself and knowing no end: it is the same vein in the heart."<sup>25</sup>

That the obstacles to religion, the faults that block the approach toward it, may, in some rare cases, by what seems like a peculiar deviation of grace, be converted from obstacles into accidental tributaries to the religious life, is no doubt true. That sensuality may be so strangely intertangled with the spiritual strands of human nature that its warmth may temporarily serve to comfort its natural enemies, this is no doubt true also—but only when the latter

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<sup>25</sup> PR 1-184.



have bent over the flame which warms them with a stern resolution to extinguish it, and only, I fancy, when this resolution is a triumphant one, and, perhaps, when the whole tale is told, only when it is no longer the kindling fires but the cooling embers that impart their heat in the act of dying. This means that piety really proceeds from the will to piety, and not from any spurious religious excitability arising from the fever of the senses. Nothing is more remote from the ecstatic cry of Pascal: *Joy! Joy! Joy!* than the dithyrambic lyricism of René or Lélia, so near neighbor to despair. And the peaceful bliss of Sister Anne-Eugénie, surveying the little patch of blue sky above the dormitory and finding it serener there than elsewhere, or dancing in sheer delight at the thought of being a black-veiled nun, that is a bliss that knows both itself and its sources too well to have even the remotest relation to the "*vague des passions*."

Another sign of the over-emotional coloring of Sainte-Beuve's conception of religion is his tendency to exaggerate the rôle of pessimism as a source of piety. "One of the most direct ways of becoming a Christian is, assuredly, to view our fallen human nature exactly as would Hobbes, La Rochefoucauld, and Machiavelli, those great positive observers. The more gloomy the view . . . the more it prepares and invites the great remedy, the desperate remedy."<sup>26</sup> Is not this to confound the cynic's contempt for human nature as a whole with the Christian's contempt for the weaknesses of human nature? And is it not to emphasize as a source of religion what is on the whole one of its by-products? Is it not to confound in short the feeling of utter poverty of the sceptic who has dismissed his last illusion with the feeling of endless riches of the believer who has ceased to value this world because he has found a better one? Contempt for human nature can never be for the Christian more than partial and accidental, a land of disillusion through which he carries intact what seemed to Sainte-Beuve only the greatest of all illusions, his faith.

<sup>26</sup> PR 3-238.



The excessively feminine and sentimental cast of Sainte-Beuve's religious sensibility stands out in sharp contrast with the more masculine tone of such a self-possessed and impersonal spirit as Goethe. When Goethe, the high priest of nature, finds himself face to face with "the stern and diseased Pascal," the antipathy is complete, the rejection is entire. A pagan Greek of the age of Pericles could not have been more profoundly shocked. Sainte-Beuve stands divided between the rival appeals of nature and of grace, he is "*désolé et enchanté*." He is divided between sympathetic emotion and a violent protest of good sense—and he ends (he, the great analyst of the heart) by wishing that these details of an excessive and Spartan Christianity had been withheld from us! Sainte-Beuve stands hesitant midway between Pascal and Goethe. Goethe, like Pascal, has chosen; he is a decided spirit. Sainte-Beuve moves sympathetically from religion to philosophy, from philosophy to religion. It is the wavering allegiance of a critical intellect, an epicurean temper, and a Jansenistic sensibility. He is a sort of nineteenth century Abelard. How fervently he entered into either mood, pagan or Christian, is revealed in many a page of his "Port-Royal," where he seems to stand with the unawarded crown of victory in his hands, alternately inclining to give it now to the champion of renunciation, now to the champion of worldliness—while invoking the advent of "the new saintliness in which both shall be reconciled—a religion which shall satisfy the heart of Pascal, while inspiring respect in the irreverent good sense of Voltaire."<sup>27</sup> Goethe resolutely put an end to the struggle between head and heart—he triumphed with an Olympian egotism over both. Pascal chose in the same decisive fashion, but he chose what Goethe rejected. Sainte-Beuve, a less powerful nature, does not choose, he wavers, leans, and drifts. The senses (that is, the natural man) decide for him: nature takes for her own whatever does not steer away from her. But he drifts away from religion in casting a longing, lingering look behind, anxious and unap-

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<sup>27</sup> PR 3-342.

peased. He is ultimately an unwilling and joyless naturalist, ill at ease in his philosophic habitat and curiously watching his Christian neighbors over the border, truly at home nowhere.

This emotional nearness to religion, is no doubt mainly tributary to the penetrating understanding which he brings to his probing of pious souls—but the homelessness of his spirit, likewise, and its straining weakness are revealed when he approaches the confines of coveted but yet untried experience. What a fundamental falsity of tone in such a passage as this: "When one has to speak of Jesus-Christ, even though it be through the lips of Pascal, one feels a sort of involuntary shudder. One fears, the moment this name is not uttered while kneeling in adoration—one fears to profane, even in merely repeating it, this ineffable name, as if even the most profound veneration might still be a blasphemy!"<sup>28</sup> Does not this sound a little like an old-fashioned dedicatory epistle, a *dédicace à la Montauron*, directed heavenward?

Sainte-Beuve has come very near describing himself and his own tenuous connection with the Christianity of Port-Royal in his sketch of M. de Tréville: "He had gifts of penetration and of delicacy, of many-sided curiosity and far-ranging intelligence, in a word, he had a turn of mind and a store of knowledge that must frequently have embarrassed his faith. There were seasons when it melted away altogether. By dint of comprehending too thoroughly and of unfolding with marvellous acumen every system of thought, he no longer felt sure that they were not one and all a superior kind of game, a diverting gymnastic for the wise. A singular Christian, and a singular neighbor for Port-Royal! A strange reversal and an unforeseen outcome of penitential piety! You believe yourself planted on one of the firmest of rocks, on a sort of Malta or Gibraltar; but all of a sudden you are adrift in the island of Delos."<sup>29</sup>

Sainte-Beuve's temporary abdication of his intellectual past, of his primarily sceptical attitude, proceeds in part

<sup>28</sup> PR 3-450.

<sup>29</sup> PR 5-93.

from his sentimental demand for outside support; he had a peculiar readiness in his youth to put his soul for carriage "into other people's wallets." He characteristically compares himself, when under the influence of some of his contemporaries, to a child who learns from his elders of strange sights which they see over the top of a high wall, "God, the soul, and the invisible, things which he begs them to show him by lifting him in their arms." For nearly a decade he thus tried to see with others' eyes and to speak the language of spiritual inspirers and protectors. His religious velleities consequently show strange variations of color. Under the influence of Madame Hugo, they are full of amorous subtilizing à la *Pétrarque*; under Saint-Simonist influences they exhibit humanitarian shadings, under Lamennais' influence theocratic gropings, under the spell of Port-Royal mystical fervors and austere aspirations. Reverting to himself, or at least to his native trend, he is an uncommitted and neutral sceptic, standing aloof from all beliefs and all enthusiasms.

"It is only when we enter by way of the heart into the spirit of Christianity, of charity, and of Jesus-Christ, that we can escape from La Rochefoucauld; it is only Christianity that can reverse the whole man; and even then the question remains whether this reversal is not itself a last form, the most subtle of all, the last master-stroke and sublimation of self-love."<sup>30</sup> Sainte-Beuve has carried not the "Imitation" but the "Maximes" with him into the sanctuary, and the wisdom of this world prevails in him over the appealing call of the other. Great as is his skill in disentangling and portraying the action of grace in the contrite heart, he is perhaps even more acute in detecting the secret survival of the frailties and vanities of the world in the heart that has sought to renounce them, in laying his finger on those cunning disguises of self-love that, like Madame de Longueville's pride, "transform themselves into angels of light in order to find nurture and to keep alive." When he finds in Madame de Lambert a note of piety that strikes him as of

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<sup>30</sup> CL 11-473.



unwonted depth, he investigates—and finds that she has echoed the austere Trappist, Rancé!

Unlike his masters in scepticism, Bayle and Montaigne, he invited woman to play a large part in his life. This—and the feminine side of his temperament—helped him to relish what repelled his masters, mystic sentimentalism. He always retained a weakness for it. He is even capable of entering sympathetically into the divagations of such an extravagant mystagogue as Saint-Martin, whom Voltaire dismissed as “absurd, mad, and stupid.” At any rate this softer strain in Sainte-Beuve kept his scepticism from hardening into cynicism. In itself, however, it is often of a disagreeable flavor. This mystic mood is incongruously crossed with vaguely conscious motives of amorous provenience. It disguises itself as piety and seeks, by cunningly diverting the flow of devout speech into the service of amatory passion, to introduce the latter, garbed as a pilgrim, into a heart that only asks to yield but wishes in yielding to have the illusion that it is opening to the love of God, when in reality it is only opening to the god of love. “While we speak so piously, the spirit of evil in us, which secretly wishes to seduce us, both her who listens and us who speak, often makes the eyes overflow like fountains of tears, which, mingling with our speech, make it only the more melodious. But let us ask ourselves: if she were less young and beautiful and less attentive to our voice, would we care during long hours to talk to her of sacrifice, of discreet friendship and of inviolable celibacy? Would we be so much given to shedding tears at her side if she were less inclined to weep with us?” Sainte-Beuve, in his later days, inclined to minimize unduly the romantic motive in his quondam piety. “I tried a little Christian mythology in my youth,” he writes to Mme. Saman, “but it has evaporated. It was for me the swan of Leda, a means of obtaining access to the fair and of kindling love in them. Youth has time and employs every means.”

Religious emotions, so intimately bound up with other sentiments and taking their color and substance from them,



tend in the obscure depths of the heart to become more or less interchangeable with these sentiments, to seem living in proportion as these are alive, and likewise to flicker out when these die. It was so in Sainte-Beuve's case. Youth and its illusions having perished, he found that this vague religiosity had perished with them. He had been only what he calls a *Chrétien de désir*, and, the desire cooling, little remained but the perfume of the past, the memory of pious sensations, and a key for unlocking those shrouded chambers of the heart where religion has its home—in others. We may say of him as he says of Vauvenargues: "All that it will prove possible to affirm is a velleity, a Christian disquietude, not properly speaking a crisis of the soul."<sup>31</sup>

When the hold on a definite faith is given up, the modern man finds a series of alluring substitutes offered him. In Sainte-Beuve's day many of these still had a charm of novelty which, in this more jaded age, has a little worn off. There were the religion of science, the religion of progress, the religion of humanity. Sainte-Beuve listened for an hour to the ardent preachers of these various faiths, but none of them could hold him very long. They represent what is currently labelled *the ideal*, that favorite object of worship for those who have ceased worshipping. The ideal was too vague a category for a mind so realistic as Sainte-Beuve's. "The word *ideal*," he says, "is a floating mantle which covers many things and whose folds hide many a hollowness."<sup>32</sup> Under the mantle his exploring instinct divined empty and obstinate chimeras fed by the fumes of vanity and presumption. And no age offered more flagrant examples of all this than his own, "that nineteenth century which will be in great part regarded as the century of charlatanism, literary, humanitarian, eclectic [understand Cousin], neo-Catholic [understand Lamennais], an age in which pretty much everybody is trying to hawk his wares."<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> CL 14-52 (note).

<sup>32</sup> Corr. 2-362.

<sup>33</sup> NL 5-253.

He hopes, rather than believes, that man may be re-created by science, may shed his old errors, his baseless hopes, his speculative illusions, and slowly become sage and rational. But as usual with him, this mood is cancelled by its opposite, and then he sees in man an *enfant qui coûte terriblement à élever*, a child who is by no means naturally wise and naturally good. He realizes that civilization is an acquired art which each generation must learn anew—and that it must create its own teachers: "It is possible to lose in three weeks the result of several years, almost of several centuries. Civilization, *life*, let us not forget it, is a thing learned and invented, perfected by the sweat of many generations and with the aid of a succession of men of genius, themselves followed and assisted by an infinity of men of taste . . . Men, after some years of peace, too readily lose sight of this truth; they come to believe that culture is something innate, that it is for mankind the same thing as nature. Do we need even yet to be warned of this? Savagery is always present, only two steps away; and as soon as we yield ground, it recommences."<sup>34</sup> Sometimes, it is true, he coquets with the idea of progress: "The idea of peace is gaining every day . . . Good sense and humanity speak too loud and with too many tongues not to be heard . . . But, though we have advanced more than half-way, we have not yet reached this desirable consummation."<sup>35</sup> And again: "There is a wide-spread good-will in our day: everybody is ready with understanding, with sympathy, with money, to do good, to relieve and diminish suffering. It is a fine and consoling spectacle."<sup>36</sup> Yet, only a few months earlier he had written: "Marcus Aurelius drained the same cup [of disillusion], but he did so silently. He did not cry out like the cynical Danton: 'I am nauseated with mankind,' but he thought it . . . We land in this same disgust by every pathway: it is only necessary to have lived a long time and to have come into close contact with the human species."<sup>37</sup> Sainte-Beuve is of a divided counsel: his sym-

<sup>34</sup> CL 1-37.

<sup>35</sup> NL 13-52.

<sup>36</sup> NL 9-452.

<sup>37</sup> NL 9-339.

pathies have a humanitarian bent, but experience has disenchanted him. At bottom, he distrusts human nature in the mass but honors it in the élite—the usual distinction enforced by experience shrewdly interpreted. The religion of humanity, the worship of one's fellow-men, implies, unhappily, the illusion that they deserve worship, and that the god who is invoked in them will in the end gloriously answer the invocation. Sainte-Beuve has no such illusion.

Humanitarianism inspires him with far less respect than any of these other modern religions. In fact, his real feeling toward it is one not of respect but of contempt. It is only drivel, *la gobemoucherie humanitaire, la plus gobemouche de toutes*.<sup>38</sup> He laughs at Hugo turned preacher and patriarch and expounding humanitarianism even when playing the merry-andrew. "I confess," he says, "that it will always prove very difficult for me to contemplate and admire myself with such constancy in the person of Humanity. Molière and all the things that moved his laughter are too unforgettable for that. Poor mankind! I see you more proud and grandiose than ever, but it is the outside that has changed more than the essence. There are moments when with Terence I hold my fellow-men very dear; there are others when they seem to me very ridiculous, very unjust, and very paltry."<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, he also recognizes instinctively that it is a fallacy to think that devotion to the general good will take precedence, even in the élite, over devotion to self. Humanitarianism is a laudable effort to capitalize the good-will of mankind—but it is fatal to overlook the fact that the operations of this bank will always be limited by deficiency of capital, and that rival institutions must be counted on to transact the major part of our business in this sublunary world. Sainte-Beuve recognizes the mediocrity of human nature; he sees humanity without illusion, with a kindly shrewdness, coolly but not frostily. He sees it as a great general does his soldiery, realizing that the same men are one day brave and one day disheartened, sometimes invincible and sometimes beaten in

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<sup>38</sup> PC 3-117.

<sup>39</sup> NL 5-231.



advance, according as circumstance favors heroism or insinuates defeat and panic. To take the moral measure of a man, he asks to see him in all his moods and to read his responses to a whole gamut of experiences. He honors human nature in its sublimities, he understands it in its shortcomings, but he resolutely refuses to worship it in the abstract.

When religion and the substitutes for religion have alike proved untenable, what remains? Scepticism remains—and, for natures neither extraordinarily frivolous nor extraordinarily buoyant, this scepticism is apt to be allied with a more or less chronic despair. "Oh, how feeble is the human spirit! It cannot resign itself to half-knowledge or to ignorance. Illusion, driven out of one door, returns at another and repeats itself incessantly. The imagination finds a new outlet; it is vain to bar its way, it speedily takes wings to itself and flies back once more to its chimeras." The philosophic sage, according to Sainte-Beuve, is one of the few sadly lucid spirits who cast off this weakness. The most characteristic feature of Sainte-Beuve's scepticism is its essential sadness. Comparing him with Goethe, Professor Babbitt goes so far as to say: "The final impression one carries away from Sainte-Beuve is that of a man who has suffered an inner defeat; from Goethe, that of a man who has fought and conquered."\* It was, once more, the old struggle of the head and the heart, each suffering defeat by turns.

The heart is naturally extreme. It is best content with those who carry their faith to the last consequences, who ride on the crest of the wave and plunge into the profoundest abysses. Reason is the mediator that balances and even undermines faith. It is at bottom the enemy of religion, because it is the friend of philosophy. It dissolves heroism and discountenances self-renunciation; it counsels compromise, reservations, and suspensions of judgment. Its nature is sceptical. Sainte-Beuve is even more precise: "Every philosophy, of whatever nature in its first head and

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\* "The Masters of Modern French Criticism," p. 127.



parent, becomes anti-Christian, or at least heretical, in the second generation: that is the law, and we may as well recognize it."<sup>40</sup> Ever since the Renaissance the world of thought has had a cooling and cracking crust. The inner fires can be less and less counted on for vitalizing heat. It would be bold to assert that man has become a more reasonable creature, but he is more governed by reason simply because he is less governed by religion. Religion is a retreating tide, and a sceptical world is emerging. Sainte-Beuve, like Arnold, had a peculiarly keen consciousness of living painfully in a transitional age,

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,  
The other powerless to be born.

Sainte-Beuve's "Port-Royal" is the chief monument of the transitional period in his intellectual life: in the *Lundis*, this transition is already far behind him. Sainte-Beuve's mind, in spite of his keen sensibility, was of this modern and impartial order in its fundamental trend. Its poetry lay mainly on the surface. The element of Bayle (so incalculably great in him, according to Faguet) was bound to prevail in the end.

His final attitude is fully painted in his discussion of Guizot's "Méditations sur la Religion." Characteristically avoiding abstraction, he pictures, not scepticism, but a sceptic; and, not less characteristically, he pictures him and his theories in an excessively lugubrious fashion. "*Il n'y a jamais place pour le sourire,*" he says. "I have always known Sainte-Beuve sad at bottom, smiling rarely, foreign to broad jests and to hearty laughter," writes one of his secretaries.\* That the critic, so pervadingly cheerful in tone, got the better of the natural man in Sainte-Beuve, is another testimony to the mysterious powers of genius. In the most confidential moods, however, it is the natural man who speaks. The sceptic is then conceived as a man who lives alone, without family or children, in a quiet attic chamber, a chemist, astronomer, or linguist (characteristically

<sup>40</sup> PR 5-355.

\* J. Levallois: *Sainte-Beuve*, p. XXXIX.

again, Sainte-Beuve conceives wisdom to be lodged in the scientific rather than in the metaphysical or literary temper). But the wisdom is coldly negative: "What he would most care to learn, he will never know; others will know it after his time, and these in their day will set a farther goal, which they will never reach; as long as men remain on this globe, they will always continue the quest, and the final word, forever receding, will never be found." The sceptic will find no consolation in nature; she is harsh and implacable; life is built up on hecatombs of dead, and the strong devour the weak. Nor will mankind indemnify him: does he not know by what law the heart is governed? Barring a few happy exceptions, men are ungrateful and inconstant and selfish. And finally, every being, even the elect and the most favored, is but an atom in an infinite series. They have their little day, their hour of shining bloom, their sacred spring, followed by decline, shadow, and night. Even posthumous fame, though achieved, is an illusion. The great, the so-called immortal names no longer stand for the being that once was, but for a factitious one; a new personality is thrust upon them by the caprices or the noisy demands of successive generations. In the end, there waits for them too the universal shipwreck. In the meantime, the sceptic has one resource: the pursuit of truth and of the naked reality. His bed is of a Spartan hardness; his pillow is not that soft one on which Montaigne lulled to rest his query: *Que sais-je?*—it is at least half stuffed with thorns. He is one of those spirits who sleep but little, and who, waking or sleeping, look for neither amusement nor consolation.<sup>41</sup>

That is the tone in which Sainte-Beuve writes in his sixtieth year. In its overwrought gloom, in its occasional fantasticality (his sage eschews marriage and all the approved cordials and febrifuges, except work), and in its touches of puerility, we see that Joseph Delorme still precariously survives.

<sup>41</sup> NL 9-100ff

Why does Sainte-Beuve's scepticism wear such mourning garb? That is largely a question of temperament. He is not only extremely sensitive, but morbidly sensitive. His feeling in later life verges on feminine nervousness. It runs to a capricious and violent irritability, strangely dissonant with the fundamental reasonableness of his nature, and a recurring surprise and distress to his intimates. It is painful to learn that the cooling of his ardent friendship for the estimable and devoted Oliviers seems to have rested on no ground more substantial than a literary dispute, a veritable *querelle d'Allemand* in which the rôle of the unreasonable German was played by Sainte-Beuve. The measure of this ill-regulated sensibility may be inferred from one of his letters to them: "Sensitiveness entails such profound suffering; every time one leaves home, one returns with a new wound: the words overheard by chance, the newspapers one has happened to unfold, the face unexpectedly met at the street-corner—everything, in short, wounds us."

Scepticism, so uncompromising and of so melancholy a complexion, is very nearly allied to pessimism. Of this too there is a vein in Sainte-Beuve, though neither prominent nor constant. He belonged to the romantic generation of 1830. None ever tried so hard to enjoy youth, and none ever felt the loss of youth so poignantly. "This wretched life," says Sainte-Beuve, "after a certain hour has struck, holds nothing in store for us except a succession of affronts and of frustrations."<sup>42</sup> "Youth gone, life is only a deadly defeat, our career is like that of a star which is being slowly chilled into extinction."<sup>43</sup> And in still darker mood, he cries: "The idea of Eternity, if one could realize it fully, is of such a nature that, looked at fixedly and without a glimmer of immortal hope, it would impel one to plunge headlong into the swirling abyss and to slay oneself in despair."<sup>44</sup> He writes to his friend Olivier: "I have always recognized that if each man for a single minute were to speak his

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<sup>42</sup> NL 5-308.

<sup>43</sup> Corr. 1-214.

<sup>44</sup> PR 4-47.



thoughts aloud, the whole fabric of society would instantly collapse into the abyss with a frightful din; and what is true of society is not altogether false even as regards friendship."<sup>45</sup> In quieter but not less despairing mood, he writes: "Taken in the mass, mankind in all periods are much the same, and in general accord themselves the pleasure of doing about as much evil as they can."<sup>46</sup>

We shall do Sainte-Beuve an injustice if we take too seriously feelings and ideas which the mobility of his nature rendered shifting and impermanent. One cannot too guardedly bring out into the foreground things that for him lay at varying depths in the background. He has certainly given us all the elements for constituting a complete picture, for he now and then lays bare the arcana of his spirit with a surprising shamelessness. All experience turns to knowledge with him—and he has no scruples in revealing even the least producible specimens that he has stumbled upon or dug up in his subterranean explorations of human nature. He is not like Hugo's heroes, who know neither whence they come nor whither they go—he freely confesses both. In a letter to Vinet, with whom he was not even on terms of intimacy, he unbosoms his black mood with a really startling unreserve: "I am reduced to the state of a purely critical intelligence viewing with a gloomy eye the death of my heart. I sit in judgment on myself, and I remain calm, cold, and indifferent: I am dead, and I look upon my dead self without emotion and almost without shadow of inner perturbation . . . The intelligence shines on this cemetery like a dead moon."<sup>47</sup> That sounds very convinced as well as very convincing; the accent of genuine feeling is unmistakable. Yet such moods are often far more intense than they are significant. They have their roots sometimes only in the superficial layers of temperament, and are dispelled, if not cured, as soon as more fundamental moods supervene. They are a vegetation that runs riot at certain periods, that one believes indigenous and permanent, and that

<sup>45</sup> Olivier, 183.

<sup>46</sup> CL 1-464.

<sup>47</sup> Corr. 1-130.



after all comes and goes with the changing seasons. It is peculiarly difficult, in a many-sided but disparate nature, to determine the part played by each of these elements in the many-toned concert of the whole. Sainte-Beuve evidently had the habit of jotting down for his own relief the grim fears and fancies and the sullen discontents that momentarily clouded his soul. He had, as most of us do, a secret chamber in his mind reserved for these spectral and disconsolate thoughts. Having by nature an elegiac turn, he kept up relations with them. Curiosity led him to seek the enlightenment that may be got from pleasure; it led him also to seek the enlightenment that may be got from pain. But if his spirit was not wholly sound, his mind was remarkably sane—and a sane mind keeps such ideas in the background. If we give them too much place in our conception of him, we run the risk of regarding the pervadingly cheerful tone of his work as an official and public philosophy flagrantly contradicting his private one and so convicting him of a sustained insincerity. When he says scornfully: "Ripen! ripen! we harden in spots, we rot in spots; we do not ripen," we shall do well to turn the page (a single page suffices) to find a more normal turn of thought: "In general we complain too much; we arraign fate and nature and society as if all our lives were vowed to wretchedness. And yet, how many hours of ease and pleasure, full of unconscious happiness, do we owe to the spring-time and to the morning sun! How many pleasant intervals, whole days even, we silently enjoy! We suffer noisily, we rejoice silently."<sup>48</sup> When Sainte-Beuve suffers so noisily, we shall not be far wrong in concluding that he is for the nonce in a very bad humor, and that, pen in hand, he remembers the adage: *Le papier souffre tout*. He must be judged more by the steady volume of his utterances than by the exceptional ones, such as his poetry, his note-books, or the occasional packets of *Pensées* that he intercalates in his work. They are, no doubt, the genuine background of his thought; but the business of the inner as well as the outer

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<sup>48</sup> PC 5-461-3.

life is chiefly transacted in the foreground; the principal actors come to the front of the stage. The exceptional private moods which Sainte-Beuve now and then allows himself are only the moods of melancholy relaxation in which Joseph Delorme is drying an obstinate elegiac tear. That is the time-honored privilege of the romantic lyricist. We must not take the poets too much at their word. Sainte-Beuve himself authorizes a certain discount: "We must make a considerable deduction from those woebegone lamentations to which the pen involuntarily lends itself when it is trying its powers and is training itself, without suspecting it, to eloquent imposture and public declamation."<sup>49</sup> The more loudly a poet laments, the more we incline to believe him a profoundly melancholy soul. Sometimes he is only a less reserved and less dignified soul. The elegiac note is more often the mark of unusual weakness than of unusual sadness. Samuel Johnson never seemed an elegiac soul, yet it would be safe to wager that he was, young or old, a far sadder man than Lamartine. No poet has lamented more dolorously than Joseph Delorme. Few, perhaps, have been more low-spirited. But this lack of tone and vitality may well have derived from sheer loneliness and ennui, both common enough woes of unfriended youth, and probably experienced by delicate spirits in far evenner measure than is generally supposed. There is no valid reason why the gift for rhyming should necessarily imply an immeasurably greater capacity for woe, and should constitute an immeasurably greater claim on our sympathies than the not altogether common gift of observing decorum and of consuming one's own smoke. In fact, the grief that rhymes itself is, at least for the time being, often (I do not say always) half cured or half forgotten amid the more agreeable throes of the sad mechanic exercise that numbs its pain. A time was to come when Sainte-Beuve missed not only the mechanic exercise, but even the pain itself. He writes to Ernest Feydeau: "Alas! I have reached that final period when one no longer has the right to be upset or resentful or

<sup>49</sup> NL 11-353.

to indulge that noble wrath or those splendid melancholies. Daniel! Daniel! whither have fled those good old times when I was so unhappy!"<sup>50</sup>

Sainte-Beuve had besides rhyming an even more solid resource, and one which most people have not. His curiosity was as great as his sensibility. Though he could not say with the more evenly balanced Montesquieu that he had never known a grief which a half-hour's reading could not dispel, still he appears rarely to have known a grief which made the half-hour of reading seem impossible. His curiosity, even in youth, held its own through all his melancholy moods, and, youth once over, he was perhaps as happy as most men who lead an over-studious and celibate existence succeed in being. In 1858 he writes to an intimate friend (the Nathalie of his poems): "As for me, I am neither very happy nor very unhappy; I am too much occupied to think of anything but my heavy burden of work. In the brief intervals, it seems to me as if life were becoming very sad and more and more deserted and barren." That is not exhilarating, but it is not pessimistic either. Most thoughtful men, standing in the shadows of old age, would say as much—or as little.

In his *sérèner* moments, when he is wholly sound as well as wholly sane, he speaks with a more authoritative wisdom—and then he finds his masters in scepticism too sceptical for him:

"The exaggeration, or, to speak frankly, the falsity in the work of Charron, is of the same nature as that in Montaigne . . . he humiliates mankind utterly, and to consider the matter only in the light of nature, he does not sufficiently recognize the sacred power that dwells in man, that light of invention which is peculiar to him, and which shines so conspicuous in certain races, that royal and conquering gaze which it is so easy for him, in the age of hope and of soaring genius, to cast boldly on the universe. Is all this an error? Or should we not consider whatever fits so

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<sup>50</sup> Corr. 1-234.



well the terrestrial and social destiny of man less as an illusion than as a harmony?"<sup>51</sup>

His final mood was a mixed one, but, what is more noteworthy, it was also a truly modest one. He writes to his friend, the Princess Mathilde: "Satiety—there is a moment when this sensation comes upon us in this banquet which we call life: then only one more drop is needed to make the cup overflow with disgust . . . But I will not be ungrateful, whatever happens. Fate has not, all things considered, used me so very ill. It has treated me better than a vast number of my fellows who were as good as myself, or better; and I have had days which have been adorned by such rare and such distinguished friendship that they count for more than many ordinary years."<sup>52</sup> There is hinted here a final reconciliation with the nature of things.

Such passages are a sufficient refutation of those who, like Faguet, think of Sainte-Beuve as an ardent apostle of scepticism to his age. They refute likewise those who would see in Sainte-Beuve the spiritual father of such mockers as Anatole France and his group. The philosophy is superficially the same, but Sainte-Beuve wears it with a difference. Unlike these jaunty merry-andrews of nihilism he is filled with neither astonishment nor admiration in the presence of his scepticism. He acknowledges it to himself and to others, simply, quietly, without displaying it like a flower in his buttonhole. He does not try to propagate it; he does not make capital of it. We never ask, as we do with Anatole France, what on earth he could do without it. He takes it seriously and sadly, in seemingly wise; he does not find in it food for artistry, entertainment, and esoteric conviviality. For Anatole France scepticism was the whole source of his dissatisfaction and the principal source of his satisfaction with life. When he did not play with it, it distressed him; when he played with it, it diverted him—and he gave most of his time to diversion. Sainte-Beuve, a thoroughly serious nature, took life, especially the intellectual life, seriously,

<sup>51</sup> CL 11-254.

<sup>52</sup> *Princesse*, 294.



and relegated his scepticism to the margin of his thought. It was only the circumference of the circle; he worked at the centre. He saw human nature as we all do, more or less in the light of his own nature; and he therefore saw it seriously, viewing its vices and its virtues with that evenness of vision which, while dispelling illusion, left still subsisting that high respect for humanity which his supposed disciples, like Anatole France, have so lightly abjured. He cherished a profounder love and respect for human nature than they were capable of; and he rightly felt that even if the artist be convinced that the truth about life is ugly and vile, and even though he copy his creations from originals in which vice stands revealed in all its odiousness, he must not paint these realities without mitigation. The business of art, he holds, is to repair the deficiencies of reality, to paint and enliven the walls of our prison. The writer must retain and not give out his poison. His philosophy may be arid and maleficent, not his art. Such utterances may not imply a wholly sound philosophy of life, but they imply at any rate a sound philosophy of literature. It is, moreover, the one which Sainte-Beuve practiced.

If we turn to the landscape of his mind, as it appears to us and as it appeared to himself, in the cold light of disillusion, with nothing to dispel its sceptic bleakness except the ruins that stand as grim monuments of dead hopes and of shattered faiths, we shall run great risk of seeing a Sainte-Beuve who existed indeed, but who existed mainly in the imagination of the real Sainte-Beuve. He was, we must never forget, richly dowered with all the gifts that time and culture place at the disposal of a fine and balanced genius, and he lived habitually, with an intensity and a completeness of delight known in equal degree only to the fewest, in the charmed world of literature. That was for him an antidote against both pessimism and misanthropy.

## IV

### THE POET

Mediocribus esse poetis  
Non di, non homines, non concessere columnae.

—*Horace*

Some of the overflow from the brimming urn of prose out of which he dipped his criticism has been caught up by Sainte-Beuve and christened poetry. But it is only passable verse, showing much erudite concern with technique, with subject-matter, with handling, and a woeful lack of inspiration to accompany so much theory. It remains tentative and experimental—and to most readers will seem an infelicitous experiment for ascertaining how completely poetry may be divorced from imagination, passion, and beauty. It interests us, mildly, not because it makes us acquainted with a poet, but because it makes us acquainted with Sainte-Beuve.

One is amazed that Sainte-Beuve, so shrewdly critical and so little endowed for poetry, should have versified and should have set so much store all his life long by his verse. Yet he unquestionably had a turn, if not a talent, for poetry. We find in his criticism, more especially in his early criticism, the images, the sprightly fancies, the imaginative vision of man and of the world, and even the fondness for festooning his thought with garlands of picturesque phrasing, which hint that the poet whom we are unable to discover in the verse lies ambushed in the prose. He had the poetic impulse quite unmistakably, but the gift of metric music was denied him. It has been so with men of far greater endowment in this region, with Chateaubriand or Ruskin, for example, who lacked only that indefinable something which might have subdued the most luxuriantly poetic prose in the world to the conventions of poetry. Their prose

attests a gift for poetry as plainly as Swift's verse attests a gift for prose.

Sainte-Beuve likes to study the first apparition of genius, its budding season, when it is possible to surprise talent in its freshness, before it has assumed a mask or a pose, or fallen into a groove, or been spoiled by popularity or soured by failure, in short, when it is most naïvely itself. This must be the principal excuse for dwelling very long on Sainte-Beuve's verse, otherwise a fairly negligible part of his literary baggage. Through it we may know him in process of formation, still immature and groping and exhibiting overtly those caprices and weaknesses of character and personality as well as those virtues of superior intelligence whose interpenetration makes the later Sainte-Beuve at times so puzzling.

Sainte-Beuve resembles Arnold in being at the same time a cheerless poet and a cheerful critic. But Arnold's poetry has the advantage of being a noble form of expression, the product of mature culture. He had ripened steadily and soberly a fruit that already in its origin belonged to a superior variety. Sainte-Beuve suffered the vicissitudes of a many-sided but less determinate genius. He leaped into an over-hasty maturity, which combined in a high degree the advantages and the disadvantages of precocity. His mind had stolen a march on his personality, his gifts crowded and jostled each other in inharmonious conjunction: his character was unable to utilize wisely the premature spoils that his intellect assembled. When harmony, or at least a *modus vivendi*, has been at last achieved, we get the cheerful critic; the preliminary struggle finds expression chiefly in the cheerless poet, but a wholly tentative, feeble, and depressing expression, in which the final note of triumph or even the premonitory apparition of a growing sanity is strangely absent. His poetry is therefore as decidedly a monument to the weaknesses of his personality as his criticism is to the high enterprise of his intelligence.

He is, here as everywhere, modest perhaps to the point of lacking a proper pride. In addressing his fellow-poets

he is humble to the point of self-abasement, almost of self-extinction. He says to Hugo:

Nous sommes devant vous comme un roseau qui plie;  
Votre souffle en passant pourrait nous renverser.

That is more humble than dignified. Again, he describes himself as a departed spirit hovering in seeming helplessness before the gates of Heaven,

Epiant le moment  
Où chaque hôte divin remonte au firmament,

and in a happy hour meeting there Alfred de Vigny (that lord of sceptics!) who will take him by the hand and introduce him! He is even capable, in this mood, of confessing his sins and confiding his pious aspirations to Mérimée (that prince of cynics!).

He paints himself without embellishment; he confesses himself to the public as readily as to Mérimée; he has, even in those romantic days, no pose; he does not look on himself with awe and wonder; he is, in short, of an almost unexampled sincerity behind the veil which a precocious literary knowingness is bound in some measure to affect: for one suspects him of a little semi-conscious exaggeration of the moods he so dolorously felt. He portrays the world around him as veraciously as he does himself; he aims at the realism of Crabbe, and he at least achieves his honesty. He aims at the simplicity of Wordsworth, and he at least achieves his unpretentiousness, and, in his own complicated way, his straightforwardness. He is the only French poet of the period who really admits us into his inner life. Had it only been more truly poetical, or even more truly romantic, the result might have been not without charm. But it was instead keyed at a dominantly low pitch, sentimentally as well as morally. He portrays experiences of a bourgeois or bohemian order, burdening and vexing a spirit that hovers impotently between acceptance and rejection, that conceives these experiences to be the whole of life, and that finds such life an exasperation, a humdrum compound of dull ennui, of vulgar routine, of bitter revolt, of cheap



and sordid dissipations. All this is very faithfully and circumstantially rendered, too much so for purposes of art. What genuine poetry Sainte-Beuve had in him was at this period more a matter of intellectual vision than of feeling. It is therefore to be sought mainly in his volumes of *Portraits*. In turning to these, we are sensible at once of a greater imaginative freedom, of a larger sweep of vision, and of a freshness of feeling that convince us that we are in a world where poetry duly asserts itself beside reality; in his poetry we are confined to the capricious experiences of an individual victim of temperament and destiny.

He is, perhaps, even more a victim of Rousseau. He reflects Rousseau's loose morals in life; he reflects Rousseau's indecorous manner in his picture of life. He rehearses his own sensual sins, calls himself a defiled spirit, an adept in infamous pleasures, and all this without any effort to ennoble or even to render romantically picturesque these unhandsome doings. In the "Consolations" they are seen in a vaguely religious retrospect; in the "Joseph Delorme" they stand as naked confessions of the cynical truth, portrayed with a seeming humility that is perhaps at bottom a form of spiritual impudence.

His poetry is not without considerable intellectual power, and has distinct value as a portrait of a certain type of character of an unusual but by no means unreal kind, the character in which analysis counteracts emotion and undermines will. We are very remote from the loose generality of Lamartine and Hugo. They both suffered from a lack of intense inner life, and consequently of inner light. Sainte-Beuve, in "Joseph Delorme," reflects an experience far more poignant, and he brought to his task a far greater gift for seeing experience lucidly. The human life that is woven into "Joseph Delorme" is therefore more truly convincing. But it has the fatal defect of being both alien and distasteful. The generalities of Lamartine and Hugo are much more poetic, and, when we can take them seriously enough, adapt themselves in some measure, to universal

human nature. The experiences of Joseph Delorme strike us only as strangely and disagreeably unfortunate.

He displays a wilful gloominess, a wanton perversity of spirit, a most unpardonable readiness to splash up the waters of Styx and Cocytus into the face of the reader whom he has invited to lean over the brink of his alleged Helicon. One of the poems begins:

Au fond des bois, à gauche, il est une vallée,  
Longue, étroite, alentour de peupliers voilée,  
Loin des sentiers battus. . .

Then of a sudden the rural vision is traversed by this diabolic touch,

En me promenant là, je me suis dit souvent:  
Pour qui veut se noyer, la place est bien choisie.

And the poem culminates with a picture of some peasants, who have found a body in the stream,

Tirant par les cheveux ce corps méconnaissable,  
Cette chair en lambeaux, ces os chargés de sable,

which they trundle to the cemetery in a wheelbarrow. To write such ghastly stuff one must be suffering from what the Germans call *Galgenhumor*: but why in Heaven's name inflict it on the public!

Sainte-Beuve had invited the Muse of Wordsworth to accompany him into the world of Baudelaire—and it was only on writing *Finis* at the end of his volume that he turned round and learned that she had refused to follow him. Sainte-Beuve is not the disciple of Wordsworth, he is the master of Baudelaire. True to his critical instincts, he recognizes and acknowledges the filiation. "You are right," he says to Baudelaire, "my poetry is akin to yours. I had tasted of the same bitter fruit whose substance is of ashes."<sup>1</sup>

Sainte-Beuve, like so many young romanticists, had a dark and curtained corner in his nature, a sick-chamber. It is to this that he withdraws to write his poetry. Here he rhymes the symptoms, the pangs, and the progress of his

<sup>1</sup> Corr. 1-360.

disease, his love, disillusion, ennui, and despair; and also the remedies for his disease, epicurean revery, religious divagation, sceptical disillusion, and even suicide. He compares his Muse to a consumptive girl whose hacking cough fetches up clots of blood from her torn lungs. Like many other poets, he assumed that the domain of poetry begins where that of prose ends, but he failed to note that it lies on the tropical and not on the polar frontier. He conscientiously rhymed his spiritual mumps and measles until, at happy intervals, supervening sanity brought him back from his sickly Muse into the lucid atmosphere of intellect and analysis.

This morose melancholy has a physiological strain; it suggests disordered nerves and sleepless nights. It is the emanation of a tired spirit in a worn body. It is altogether graceless and repellent, and dwells in a sordid and sullen gloom at the farthest remove from poetry. There is an atmosphere of premature decay, of languor, of dull discouragement, hanging like a cloud over the spiritual landscape. There is no passion of revolt, no mad protest against the cruelty of fate—that, in its way, might be very lyrical indeed—but instead there is a dead and leaden acquiescence, a faintly shuddering fatalism, a chill as of a vegetation blighted in the bud and dying before it has lived. The poet, already past twenty (and therefore no longer the dupe of youthful hopes), reduces his demands on life to this modest compass:

Pourquoi ne pas enfin trouver une âme tendre,  
Affligée elle-même et qui saurait m'entendre,  
Deux yeux noirs d'où les pleurs auraient coulé longtemps,  
Une brune, un peu pâle, ayant bientôt trente ans,  
Ou veuve, ou presque veuve; et qui, lasse du monde,  
Heureuse d'accepter un cœur qui lui réponde,  
Le veuille à soi, l'enlève?—et tous les deux d'accord,  
Dans sa terre, en Anjou, Touraine ou Périgord,  
Nous irions nous aimer d'une amour longue et forte.  
Ce serait un château, gothique ou non, qu'importe!

What pale ecstasies and what a second-best substitute for happiness—even for one whose twentieth year has al-

ready slipped its cables and gone down the stream of time! One wonders how long this precarious bliss will endure. Will the fickle poet's fancy not revert from Périgord to Paris? Doubtless, if he continues to be as he has been:

Mais moi, demain, lassé d'un bonheur trop facile,  
Retrouvant le dégoût en mon âme indocile,  
Moi qui poursuis toujours en de vaines amours  
Un même être rêvé qui m'échappe toujours,  
Demain, le coeur saignant d'une plaie éternelle,  
Malgré les doux serments relus dans sa prunelle,  
Les baisers, les grands bras prêts à me retenir,  
Demain, je sortirai pour ne plus revenir,  
Car je foule la fleur sitôt qu'elle est ravie,  
Et mon bonheur, à moi, n'est pas de cette vie.

Even more bizarre is the famous poem *Les Rayons Jaunes*, in which his Muse, with fantastic morbidity, makes a toy of life and death, and with the mad preoccupation of a colorist, of a victim of jaundice chromatically æstheticizing in the presence of the dead, sees humanity executing the steps of the *danse macabre* amid glints of yellow ivory and the smoky gold of dim candle-light:

La lampe brûlait jaune, et jaune aussi les cierges,  
Et la lueur glissant aux fronts voilés des vierges  
Jaunissait leur blancheur;  
Et le prêtre, vêtu de son étole blanche,  
Courbait jauni comme un épi qui penche  
Sous la faux du faucheur . . .

J'ai vu mourir, hélas! ma bonne vieille tante.  
J'étais là . . . puis, autour, des cierges brûlaient jaune,  
Des prêtres priaient bas. . . .

Elle m'aimait pourtant . . . et ma mère aussi m'aime,  
Et ma mère à son tour mourra; bientôt moi-même  
Dans le jaune linceul  
Je l'ensevelirai . . .

Jamais deux enfants purs, deux anges de promesse,  
Ne tiendront suspendu sur moi, durant la messe,  
Le poêle jaunissant . . .

Jamais sur mon tombeau ne jaunira la rose  
Ni le jaune souci.



The reader also who seeks here the charm of poetry, perhaps, as the French say, *rit jaune*.

There is an approach here, though a remote and dubious one, toward the religious motive. It was to become more intimate, though hardly less dubious, in the volume by which the "Poésies de Joseph Delorme" was followed in a twelvemonth, the "Consolations." Compared with his fellow-poets Hugo and Lamartine, Sainte-Beuve has a religious note of greater genuineness, however inferior poetically. He had a far deeper comprehension of Christianity, of its relation to the moral life, of the nature and the bearing of its precepts. He had also a far keener feeling for its sentimental consolations and for its austerities. He missed being a Christian by a narrower margin than they, though even in his case the miss was not simply as good as a mile but better. They give us far more of the poetry of religion, he gives us a little more of the substance of religion. He has nothing of their hymnologic ecstasies, or of their prophetic attitudinizing. He recognizes that the real centre of religion lies in renunciation of self and of the world. If he, too, stops at the outer gate, it is, at this early moment, not merely from scepticism, nor from imperfect insight, it is from a tragic weakness of the will, from an unpurged worldliness that he could not shake off. He thus came to feel himself a victim at the same time of his own faults and of fatality.

So, if he had in his heart a corner that was vaguely Christian, he had another that was decidedly pagan, morbidly sentimental and voluptuous, a corner in which the sickliest and weakest part of himself lay suffering from the *mal de René*, that strange disorder compounded of the headache and the heartache which disordered living and disordered thinking combine to produce. What more natural than the visitation of missionary thoughts from the neighboring corner, coming to bring consolation to the sufferer? The pagan Sainte-Beuve has given a full account of himself in "Joseph Delorme"; the pious Sainte-Beuve speaks in the "Consolations." But speaking as ambiguously and as

feebly as he does, it is only natural that he should be in the end less converting than converted, and should carry away the germs of the disease to which he had come to minister. The "Consolations" are, accordingly, some years later, followed by the "Pensées d'Août," reflecting a dispirited, autumnal, and Chateaubriandesque reversion to his old self.

The complexity of Sainte-Beuve's nature, that distressing lack of simplicity and spontaneity which is the sign of his mood in this moulting period, is in his religious poetry the great drawback.

C'est sans doute qu'en moi la coupable nature  
Aime en secret son mal, chérit sa pourriture,  
Espère réveiller le vieil homme endormi  
Et qu'en croyant vouloir je ne veux qu'à demi.

He has Saint Augustine running through his head and Tibullus installed in his heart. Saint Augustine's Confessions have had a kind of success that he could hardly have anticipated. There is a tribe of young men who know them almost by heart—certain pages of them—yet who would never dream of opening any other of his works, who know him as a man before he became a saint and as a lover before he became a theologian. They know what he has said of the charm of the pagan life almost as thoroughly as they ignore what he has said of the austerities of the religious life. For them he is not the foremost of churchmen but the foremost of amorists. And these same readers even contrive to get a kind of morose delectation out of the austere pages of the "Imitation." The intermingling of Saint Augustine and the "Imitation" with the poet's own sensual reveries, of pious aspirations and of remorseful reactions with the reminiscences of sinful indulgence, this overlapping of a keen comprehension of what is Christian with a keen relish of what is pagan, all suggest that we have not got very far away from Chateaubriand. Sainte-Beuve is trying to reach the ear of God, but he remains near enough to earth to be overheard by Madame Victor Hugo.

The pictures of personal experience in "Joseph Delorme" and of pious moods in the "Consolations" are happily not

the whole of Sainte-Beuve's poetry. Running through his three volumes, but especially prominent in the "*Pensées d'Août*," there is a vein of realistic and descriptive verse in which he attempted to be a French Wordsworth. This is his chief claim to originality as a poet, but his originality is more notable in the attempt than in the accomplishment. He aimed at the introduction of a new note in French poetry—a note that is never very poetic perhaps—that of a humble everyday realism which aspires to give us the poetry of common things, and which in his case most emphatically gives us only the common things without their poetry. We get the poetry of common things only by deserting them, by using them as a point of departure. Even then the result is apt to be equivocal, poetry for the unpoetical, popular in proportion to the unredeemed residue of commonplace that survives in it. James Whitcomb Riley leaped into popularity, Wordsworth crept into it. It is, after all, the imaginative touch that is required to elicit poetry from such unpromising materials. One must see ordered pictures in the disorderly picturesqueness of nature and ideal wholes in the scattering fragmentariness of man. Of visual imagination of any kind, the source of half the poetry of the romanticists, Sainte-Beuve had almost none. His pictures are elaborately constructed, not seen in a flash; nature is recalled piecemeal rather than conjured up in plastic combinations. He has a certain imaginative gift of the kind that expresses itself in images, but it is of an order more intellectual than poetic. They do not flash like a train of meteors through his mind; though they are born in the territory of the imagination, they are born very near the frontier of the intellect. They are images that tend to be symbols; they not only contain an idea, but carry in themselves a surviving hint that before undergoing transformation they were locked up in the idea. Not that they are mechanical and arbitrary; but, even when most spontaneous, they have the minimum rather than the maximum of spontaneity. This minimum, however, they have; they are never baldly algebraic. They are the images of a man of letters rather than of a poet,



but of one whose taste is of great fineness and whose sympathetic understanding is so quick that when his mental vision is kindled it communicates a little of the glow to his imaginative faculty.

The realism of Sainte-Beuve's poetry is more akin to that of Crabbe than to that of the Lake poets, who seem to have been more a pretext than a model. And even as regards Crabbe, the resemblance is chiefly one of manner. Sainte-Beuve does not get far enough away from reality, just as the other French poets did not get near enough to it. So, instead of creating a realistic poetry, and furnishing patterns for future poets, he gave the theory of it and furnished hints which others were to utilize with better art. He can thus claim something of the merit of Lamartine's "Jocelyn," and of the work of later poets like Brizeux, Coppée, and others. But the chief merit belongs to the English poets who furnished the original hints and the only satisfactory examples. Sainte-Beuve, at any rate, uttered a needed protest against the conventions that have always too much controlled French poetry. The romanticists had thrown off the old ones only to substitute new ones. Many a page of Racine seems naturalness itself beside Victor Hugo, who revolted from Racine in the name of naturalness. Sainte-Beuve was for discarding both the old and the new conventions, for creating a poetry that took the immediate experience, whatever it might be, as its matter, instead of ranging far and wide for the so-called poetical ones, a poetry that derived no help from decorative devices and poetic diction, and which, except for the conventions of rhyme and rhythm (and of prosodic technicalities, on which Sainte-Beuve laid a curious stress) should be pure nature caught in the act, a poetry which, translated into practice, proves to be indistinguishable from prose. That of Sainte-Beuve usually is quite indistinguishable:

Plus est simple le vers et côtoyant la prose,  
Plus pauvre de belle ombre et d'haleine de rose,  
Et plus la forme étroite a lieu de le garder.



It resembles that part of Wordsworth which is dead. It still more resembles Cowper and Crabbe, when they are only imperfectly alive:

Il tenait, comme on dit, un cabinet d'affaires;  
De finance ou de droit il débrouillait les cas,  
Et son conseil prudent disait les résultats.

Reality and poetry (like truth and beauty) are not hostile to each other, but they are different. It is as perilous to identify them as it is to make them antinomies. The romantic group insisted on their opposition, Sainte-Beuve insisted on their likeness. They often gave us poetry with a minimum of reality; he gave us reality with a minimum of poetry. He felt, even in the finest of French verse, that over-literary quality, that strain of the artificial which is always in some degree present in this over-eloquent poetry. He was willing to sacrifice a good deal of art to get a little nearer to nature. From the poetry of the isolated genius, of the stormy Titan, of the always somewhat inhuman individualist, he pointed toward a poetry nearer to our normal feelings, a poetry singing of that which has been and may be again, a poetry in closer touch with life. In wishing to limit it to humble life, he was in a measure subscribing to the modern democratic and popular ideal, for which he always had a certain sympathy. In any case, he was right in so far as he invited poetry to become less purely personal. That Sainte-Beuve, living in that heyday of wild romanticism, with Victor Hugo for his bosom friend, and seeing Byron and Napoleon worshipped as the twin gods of the age, should have set up so unexciting an ideal for the poet's practice is a memorable mark of his critical sense. To see otherwise than his great fellow-poets, to point in an exactly opposite direction, was a striking exhibition of critical detachment; to oppose to theirs, single-handed yet with success, an art so different would have required a genius equal and perhaps superior to their own. He failed; but the humanitarian motive that presently began, for better or for worse, to crop out in their poetry was not a little due to him. More than this only genius could

have accomplished, and genius for poetry Sainte-Beuve, as we have seen, did not possess. Only the triumphant confidence of genius could have completely emancipated him from those disturbing contemporary influences which prevented him from conceiving his ideal in sounder and purer form. The two most essential qualities of the English models that he thought to emulate are, in the Lake poets, an extraordinary purity of sentiment, and, in the realistic poets, an extraordinary normality of vision. Such things were very remote indeed for one immersed like Sainte-Beuve in the wild current of French romanticism in the Paris of 1830. Even Maurice de Guérin, who in his provincial seclusion achieved such singular purity of inspiration, had only to come to Paris to lose it. Sainte-Beuve, a student of physiology, an adept in eighteenth century materialism, a journalist in touch with the feverish public life of the day, a friend of the romanticists pressed into service as their advocate, torn by the conflict of an eighteenth century mode of thought with a nineteenth century mode of feeling, coquetting with revolutionary ideas, with socialistic dreams, with neo-Catholic aspirations, and at the same time living the life of the senses, vainly trying to steer between the demands of friendship, the seductions of amorous intrigue, and the terrors of entangling passion—Sainte-Beuve could follow his English guides only with faltering steps and erratic digressions and at an interval that might almost preclude recognition. How hopelessly great the interval was may be surmised from his imitation of one of Wordsworth's sonnets in which the "maidens withering on the stalk" suffer a sea-change into

Deux vieilles sœurs,  
Deux revêches beautés parlant de ravisseurs.

The English, according to Sainte-Beuve, have a poetic literature far superior to the French, one above all more healthy and vital.<sup>2</sup> This, unhappily, remains as true after Sainte-Beuve's contributions as it was before. Yet he considered

<sup>2</sup> Corr. 1-273.

himself, and is currently considered, "a rivulet of those sweet, melancholy, and poetic Lakes"!

The English poets aspired to reproduce nature in her familiar garb of everyday because they had been born and bred in her household; Sainte-Beuve came to her, as he came to all things in those days, in an experimental spirit and with the offer of a precarious and transitory homage. The humble life that he attempts to paint is not rural but urban; the luxurious charm of opulent city-life is struck out from the picture, but the idyllic charm of the countryside is not substituted for it. The humble life becomes synonymous with the life of poverty as seen by a solitary student in a Latin Quarter garret. It is the bleak and uninviting poetry of privation and loneliness, of morbid and wingless revery. It pictures poverty seen in too mean a light, in too restricted an area, without its compensations, in short almost without its poetry, as stern as it is in Crabbe, but without the manly tone that goes so far in him to redeem its sordidness and without the intimate sympathy that almost reconciles one to its lack of fineness. Here it is painted with more curiosity than sympathy, with more pity than intimacy. In spite of the evident sincerity of the mood, there is a suggestion of intrusive literary motives accompanying the human one, the chill of a theory sadly incomplete. Sainte-Beuve himself even suggests for his choice of themes reasons less compelling than Wordsworth would have dreamed of admitting, and more purely circumstantial. His rivals had entered the field before him and had staked out their claims,

Avant qu'il fût à moi, l'héritage était pris.

This was surely a very minor motive at most, yet it too may well be in part responsible for verses so largely experimental,

Des vers à force d'art et de vouloir venus.

When the poet is also a critic, not only will his theories color his poetry but his poetry will color his theories. A

poet not only writes verse to fit his theory, but he makes his *ars poetica*, first, to fit his talent, and secondly, to fit such verse as he has written. Sainte-Beuve furnishes a theory and a *procédé* more or less new with each successive volume of his poems; yet he is so little insistent that we get hints of defection from his own ideas and of doubts as to his own performance.

His poetry, as is to be expected, is most attractive when he almost (though never quite) forgets theory and rhymes the mood of the moment, or when his refined intellectual tastes supply his theme. An occasional sonnet like that on Ronsard, an epistle in didactic verse on some literary theme, a graceful imitation of old-time singers such as *A la Rime*, or a contemplative poem like

“Toujours je la connus pensive et sérieuse,”

or again, poems in which the thought redeems the pedestrian manner, or in which one may meet at times with such pregnant verses as

Naître, vivre et mourir dans la même maison,  
Le temps, vieillard divin, honore et blanchit tout,—

such are the somewhat pale flowers that dutiful critics cull out for a public that has long since given over seeking them in the “*Poésies Complètes*.” They are the graceful diversions of a man of letters. It is in this rôle always that Sainte-Beuve is most attractive. Let us, since this is the element in his work that is most pleasing, pause to catch his two or three most characteristic notes. Sainte-Beuve was not, like Lamartine, born under lunar influences. He felt no impulse, like Hugo, to recreate reality by distorting and dislimning it into new shapes, however impressive. His imagination clung to the familiar and shunned the strange. It is pledged from the outset to be loyal, and not fantastic, nor even poetically fanciful. In the hundreds of verses which Hugo addressed to Madame Hugo, we get in



the end a less clear idea of her than in these half-dozen verses of Sainte-Beuve:

Où naissent des beautés pareilles à la tienne?  
Où sont les pas traînants, l'allure ionienne,  
Les noirs cheveux lustrés sur un col obscurci,  
L'œil aigu d'épervier armant un fier sourcil?  
—Oui, d'un jeune épervier qui s'étonne et se dresse—  
Tout le reste ineffable en douceur et paresse.

Everywhere in Sainte-Beuve we have the sensation of dealing with solid realities on solid ground. His affinity with Crabbe is in this respect a very genuine one. Such a poem as *A Madame la Comtesse de T . . .*, in the "Pensées d'Août," would not have been disavowed by the master, and it has about the same amount and the same kind of charm that is to be found in Crabbe's average manner.

If Sainte-Beuve did not, in any unusual degree, love the representatives of the humble life whom he aimed to naturalize in French poetry—and another proof that he did not is found in their almost total absence from his prose—still he has a very genuine, though more philosophic than poetic, preference for the simple life. When he avoids a harsh realism and sees man and nature in more amiable mood, he exhibits a quiet, thoughtful, half literary feeling of a mildly Horatian flavor. His landscapes, done on a very miniature scale, unambitious and a little tame, have a sincerity and a humble fidelity that give one the impression of familiar approach to a nature gently humanized and wholly apprehensible, a nature seen on *les coteaux modérés*, or inside the mossy walls of a city-garden where a few slender trees cast their spare shadows with impartial favor over tiny beds of flowers and a few well-weeded rows of peas and beans. It is agreeable, soothing, sedative—the indiscreet would say, classic. Perhaps one may venture to say of Sainte-Beuve as a poet of the landscape what he says of Ampère: "He is enough a landscape artist for one who sketches but does not paint."

If we pass from the garden to the home and its habitant, we find again the same quiet coloring and the same sober

mood. He differs from his beloved prototype Horace in putting his demands on life a pitch lower than his master in wisdom. His *hoc erat in votis* is moderate indeed. He does not crave a Tiburtine villa; a shaded cot is hermitage enough for him. He has no desire for the elegancies and the luxuries, the banquets, the Falernian wine, and the Tyrian fabrics which the Roman preacher of moderation suffered to enter as ornaments into both his life and his poetry. His temper is not exactly the totally abstinent one of Socrates in the market-place; it remains epicurean at the core, but the epicureanism has a very mild flavor. He dreams of calm, uneventful, even monotonous, days, obscurely passed in studious leisure in some sleepy provincial town, screened from the hubbub of the vexing world, without ambition, with no luxury (except an ever-growing collection of books), asking no special favor at the hand of fate, save the time and mood for reading them, an intimate friend or two, blessed with delicate and congenial tastes, with whom he may discuss them, and a fair Phyllis or a black-eyed Lalage with whom he may as agreeably forget them:

Je me dis: O bonheur! pourtant j'en étais digne!  
A l'ombre d'un pommier, au pied de cette vigne  
Et sous ce petit mur,  
Quelques amis, l'étude, à mon âme calmée  
Suffisaient; oui, c'est là près d'une épouse aimée  
Qu'il fallait vivre obscur.

Thus he speaks in his more decorous moments. When he lapses a little into his more voluptuous tone, he sings:

Pour trois ans seulement, oh! que je puisse avoir  
Sur ma table un lait pur, dans mon lit un œil noir,  
Tout le jour du loisir; rêver avec des larmes;  
Vers midi, me coucher à l'ombre des grands charmes,  
Voir la vigne courir sur mon toit ardoisé,  
Et mon vallon riant sous le coteau boisé;  
Chaque soir m'endormir en ma douce folie,  
Comme l'heureux ruisseau qui dans mon pré s'oublie;  
Ne rien vouloir de plus, ne pas me souvenir,  
Vivre à me sentir vivre! . . . Et la mort peut venir.

That is a very pretty note. Again, in the austerer atmosphere of the "Consolations," he takes up the same theme:

Oh! j'ai rêvé toujours de vivre solitaire  
 En quelque obscur débris d'antique monastère,  
 D'avoir ma chambre sombre, et, sous d'épais barreaux,  
 Une fenêtre étroite et taillée à vitraux,  
 Et quelque lierre autour, quelque mousse furtive,  
 Qui perce le granit et festonne l'ogive;  
 Et frugal, ne vivant que de fruits et de pain,  
 De mes coudes usant ma table de sapin,  
 Dans mon fauteuil de chêne aux larges clous de cuivre  
 J'ai rêvé de vieillir avec plus d'un vieux livre.

Was I not right in saying that this is the poetry of a man of letters? Ronsard sought the companionship of the wild-wood with a book in his hand: Sainte-Beuve can dream of sojourning with nature and with love only with a whole library for solace. This passion for books and for the whole world that they imply, was too great in Sainte-Beuve to allow the free development of the lyrical passion that romantic poetry feeds on. His feeling is more akin to the languorous longings that haunt the tired chambers of the student's brain after he has closed his book. And when he has dropped his volume to seek in Phyllis or in Lalage the continuation of the sweet dreams it inspires, how easily he is drawn back again into the charmed circle of literature by a glimpse of a folio Ronsard or a Lucan in quarto!

J'y cours, adieu, vierges au cou de cygne!  
 Et, tout le soir, je lorgne un maroquin.

The presence of the critic in this poetry is shown by the theoretical underpinning that is everywhere present; by the constant supervening of ideas—a defect of which one can hardly accuse his romantic rivals; by the analytic and psychologic turn which emotion, recoiling on itself, is here so habitually given up to; by the inordinate amount of learned and lettered allusion that the verse carries in its current; and finally by the frequent substitution for lyricism of al-

most professionally critical disquisition. Some of Sainte-Beuve's best-remembered criticism occurs in his verses :

Lamartine, ignorant, qui ne sait que son âme.

Et Vigny, plus secret,  
Comme en sa tour d'ivoire, avant midi rentrait.

He has judged others; he has judged himself as well. We have seen how complete and how uncompromising was his portraiture of his private self. He furnishes likewise the elements for a complete and uncompromising judgment of the poet. The coldly uncharitable reader of his verse might sum up in some such fashion as this the impression it produces on him: This poetry lacks exhilaration, imaginative freshness; it does not escape from the time-worn and the trivial; it lacks the musical word and the musical thought; it lingers in the anteroom of the Muses where the thoughts gather that are candidates for poetic transfiguration. Those of Sainte-Beuve have never been summoned into the divine presence, and are doomed to issue again as they entered, still mere thoughts, mechanically and spiritlessly repeating in stubbornly hammered out *bouts-rimés* the musical echoes cunningly caught by an eager ear at the key-hole of the unopening *adytum* beyond, verses unhappily suggesting to the less preoccupied ear of a profane auditor that there is something more prosaic than prose itself, namely prosaic verse. It has too much collateral implication to be "simple." It is too much sicklied over with the pale cast of thought to be poetically "sensuous." It is too full of contrarious actions and reactions of mood to be "passionate." It is too many things at a time ever greatly to be one thing. When the poet writes in a religious strain, he cannot forget that he is a lover; when he writes in an amorous strain, he cannot forget that he is a sceptic; when he writes in a sceptical strain, he cannot forget that he is a posthumous Jansenist. We listen for the musical thought enveloped in musical words, and the only sound we hear is the sudden folding of the wings of the Muse after her vain effort to soar. Such gray and lacklustre poetry as we find



in this prose so discreetly run mad is diffuse and dilute: the poet has not the art of disposing his pale and scentless flowers into a bouquet; they hang loosely in confused and wilting clusters in his nerveless grasp. His poems have no internal order, no inevitable progression and climax, no vital poetic form; in short, the spirit instead of being lyrical is anti-lyrical; the movement of the verse, instead of being soaring, is drooping; the stanzas end weakly and the poems oscillate and sink hesitantly and helplessly to a spiritless close.

All this has been said by his critics, and all this Sainte-Beuve has said before them. He confesses that his poetry is eccentric and morbid.

Ma lyre est bizarre,  
Je le sais trop.

Pour moi, pauvre déchu, réveillé d'un doux songe,  
L'aigle saint n'est pour moi qu'un vautour qui me ronge  
Sans m'emporter au ciel.

He asserts the mediocrity of his inspiration:

Tout mon être est ainsi: pas d'haleine trop haute;  
Promenade aux coteaux, poésie à mi-côte.

C'est que je suis mal né;  
Qu'aux limbes d'ici-bas justement condamné,  
Je m'épuise à gravir la colline bénie  
Où siège Dante, où vont ses pareils en génie.

He admits that his poetry is bleak and uninviting:

Sous ma triste muraille,  
Loin des nobles objets dont le mal me travaille,  
Je ne vis qu'une fleur, un puits demi-creusé,  
Et je partis de là pour le peu que j'osai.

He acknowledges that in his verse nature shines with sadly scant charms:

A peine j'y greffai quelque mûre sauvage,  
J'y semai quelques fleurs dont je sais mal les noms.

He owns that his verse is forced and feeble:

Qu'aux limbes d'ici-bas, justement condamné,

He grants that the style is too harsh to please the ear,

A cause des vers durs enchâssés dans la chaîne.

Dans mes efforts la grâce s'est enfuie.

He goes further and acknowledges defeat in his struggle with expression:

Si tu lis en mon cœur ce que je n'y puis lire,  
Et si ton amitié devine sur ma lyre  
Ce qui n'en peut sortir. . .

In fine, he admits that his poetry is a failure: "My verses," he says in his very last years, "are lame, crowded, containing more sense than words. They are chamber-poetry, made for the shadows and not for the sunshine. Oh! how different is Pindar!"<sup>3</sup> With this verdict of the critic on his own verse, the reader, even with the best will in the world to judge more favorably, is only too apt to concur—though had Sainte-Beuve said as much of any of his fellow-poets, he would have been accused of malice. And the reader will be not less inclined to apply to Sainte-Beuve's own case his words:

"When a man has only a single special talent, his best course, when he turns critic, a professional critic writing on all sorts of subjects, is to forget this talent, to pocket it once and for all, and to acknowledge that nature is greater and more varied than she proved herself in creating him. Incomplete artists that we are, let us at least have an intelligence larger than our talent and our work."<sup>4</sup>

We may, however, be inclined to wonder why Sainte-Beuve, while judging his verse with such rigorous impartiality, should at the same time have cherished it with such obstinate partiality. Doubtless because he had put his talent into his criticism and his sensibility into his poetry. Our talent is a gift that we carry with us; our sensibility is

<sup>3</sup> Corr. 1-295.

<sup>4</sup> NL 1-10.

ourself. That explains why Sainte-Beuve secretly preferred his less inspired work. But the sensibility embalmed in his poetry was peculiar without being extraordinary; the talent that animates his criticism was extraordinary without being peculiar; that is why the world prefers his criticism. He has said that it means shipwreck for a poet to turn critic. The public will reverse the oracle and will rejoice that the inauspicious transformation to which he aspired was so soon renounced.

It is, indeed, a happy idea to translate this verse back into plain prose. Let us turn a deaf ear to the music (it has no haunting quality), neglect the rhymes (they are not insistent), overlook the imagery (it is barely visible), close our eyes to the colors (they are of a fading pallor), forget the feeling (it is not agreeable), and what will remain? More assuredly, than Hugo or Lamartine or Musset, if submitted to the same process, would furnish: there will remain ideas, always tangible, often substantial, sometimes significant. The poet has vanished; the critic is disengaged.

## V

### THE NOVELIST

Dans "Volupté," je me suis donné l'illusion mystique pour colorer et ennuager l'épicurisme.

—*Sainte-Beuve*

Not less than his poetry, Sainte-Beuve's novel "Volupté" is an autobiographic confession. It belongs to that long line of books inaugurated by Rousseau, in which the writers lay bare before the public those pages of their private life that other men usually conceal from their closest confidants. Its title is exact: it is a study of what was throughout his life Sainte-Beuve's besetting weakness, disagreeably complicated by what was very far from being a source of strength, by a streak of sentimental mysticism. The book might have been entitled in full: "Volupté, or from Physiology to Theology." It is voluptuousness that serves as the hyphen between the two: that is the dubious originality of the work. It seems, in spite of its striking merits, unworthy of the intelligence and taste of its author.

If the reputation of a novel were determined solely by the amount of talent that has gone into it, "Volupté" would take a fairly high rank. It is a character study by one whose genius for the study of character was his chief gift, and who has perhaps never had a rival, at least among those who have dealt with verifiable realities. But the reputation of a novel is justly determined by the variety and charm of the story-telling talent that goes into it; and of these qualities Sainte-Beuve could show very little in the narrow limits of an analytic autobiographical novel without a plot. There is a portentous amount of lucidity, so much that the hero and the world he moves in appear cruelly divested of romance in this inexorable illumination. Amaury is Sainte-Beuve in his most wayward and graceless years—for one may well be pardoned for preferring the out-and-out



epicurean that Sainte-Beuve was in conduct in his later period to the ambiguous amalgam of high and low that we encounter here. It presents his spiritual "awkward age." He has consented—one wonderingly asks why—to put before us a self that appears so discreetly veiled in his maturer work that we are hardly convinced of its survival, and which, moreover, is redeemed by all the poise and wisdom of maturity. Here, if our knowledge of him is a little enlarged, our respect is more than a little diminished. He falls into the grievous error with which he rightly reproached Rousseau, that of revealing the morbid and uninviting areas of his personality, and of revealing them with an emphasis of exactitude that is in itself an exaggeration.

It is, quite as much as any of Sainte-Beuve's critical writing, a psychologic study. It is an inventory of the author's state of mind at the time he wrote. It is only a mood prolonged through four hundred pages. It is the most static of novels. There are, it is true, other novels besides this which have so little action that, if one read them for the plot, one might as well go hang oneself, as Johnson said of "Clarissa." But in "Volupté" the emotion is as static as the action, and never did so little emotion demand so much explication. Touch upon touch is added to enrich the portrait with a thousand delicate shadings, but their very multiplicity ends by making them seem almost indistinguishable. All the variations are rigidly confined within the limits of the original neutral color; they seem like the shadings of a shading, spiritual synonyms repeating but not renewing each other. A page may seem beautiful, a chapter may seem interesting, but the whole is tiresome. In this novel, moreover, the present is past; the personages never are but always have been together; they do not talk and act, they have talked and acted—and, even so, not very strenuously. The chilling hand of time has passed over them; they were, and are not. The hero has survived to tell the tale, and narration and drama being both reduced to history and even disintegrated into analysis, we are left free to feel, like Renan's curate preaching on the Passion, that "all this

happened very long ago, and perhaps it is not even true." As a novelist Sainte-Beuve shows little narrative and even less dramatic talent. "*Volupté*" is, as George Sand said, "a book too special, a sublime book on a subject which paralyses its effect"—and written, one might add, in a manner which tends to complete this partial paralysis.

Sainte-Beuve speaks quite as much in his own name as in that of his hero in such significant pages as the following:

"To love and to be loved, to combine pleasure with love, to feel myself free while remaining faithful, to cling to my secret chain even while indulging momentary infidelities; to polish my mind and to adorn it with knowledge only to make myself more dear as a lover, only to give more to the beloved object and to explain the world to her; such was the epicurean scheme of life in which I really sought all my happiness; such was the sickly cure for my disease that would have sufficed me. As for the glory of the writer or the warrior, which solicited me at times, once satisfied by love I should have turned to it a deaf ear: the first zephyr from the woods would have banished my regrets. As for ambition and action, I could easily have learned to despise them; as for study, I should have sought only its finer flowers. It is sweet to be the slave of love and to forget all else. Religion, alas, I should no doubt have accommodated to the waywardness of my heart and of my senses; I should have borrowed from it something to feed and to comfort my anodyne remorse; I should have made of it a profane crown for my love. That is the level to which I had sunk by moving on from dream to dream. Except voluptuous pleasure, I have, during this time, never wished anything for its own sake; when I had the appearance of wishing or of acting from any other motive, it was always at bottom thanks to this secret impulse. What the philosopher Helvétius has said about this sole incentive of mankind in general was strictly true of me . . . Before the last days of this autumnal season of youth, I always imagined (I being present and on my knees) the languishing death of my loved one in the bosom of a religion that brings forgiveness. And

I pictured myself, after a few years of widowed grief and wandering solitude, dying piously in my turn, toward the age of *forty-three* at the latest. That was the terminus beyond which I could not endure the thought of surviving here on earth.”<sup>1</sup>

What a sophisticated amalgamation in all this of unmanly epicureanism and of religious faith, of forgetfulness of God and of invocation of God! The unsuspecting reader may see here only Amaury and Madame de Couaën; the reader whose eyes are unsealed will see instead Sainte-Beuve and Madame Victor Hugo—and will find himself in possession of the key to Sainte-Beuve’s shifting emotions and thoughts during nearly a decade of his youth, as well as their not wholly inaudible echoes in his later years.

Amaury, after a distressingly complete experience of love in all its forms, is led by satiety and disillusion into the church, and it is as a priest that he incongruously indites this unsavory record of his past. To analyze his pure love (for a married woman), and his love, less pure (for another married woman), and his wholly impure loves for innumerable women who are not marriageable at all, to prolong this analysis through endless chapters of fine-spun subtlety, and to put all this into the mouth of a lover who thus seems, even when carried away by feeling, to be most unwarrantably occupied with himself so that all his emotion has a deadly analytic chill—this is an initial awkwardness fatal to sympathetic interest. This distaste is augmented by the fact that the hero is thoroughly unprincipled and ungenerous, preying on all his friends, betraying those who trust him, and seeking only the satisfaction of his own desires and an escape at any price from his own morbidity. He belongs to the family of René and Adolphe rather than to the more truly sentimental one of Werther. He harbors behind his greedy demand for sentimental satisfaction all the chilling scepticism of Adolphe and all the bitter frenzy of René. His nearest approach to vigor of will and fire of passion is in moments when his vice, morally if not le-

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<sup>1</sup> *Volupté* 157-8.



gally, borders on crime. In his best moods even, he is but indifferently tender, in his worst he is energetically cruel.

As a diversion from "the purest of passions" (for Monsieur de Couaën's wife) Amaury has inaugurated a simultaneous love-affair with a more coquettish and somewhat more responsive lady (Monsieur de R.'s wife). "I had wished," says the ultimately disappointed lover, "to escape in her company from the purest of passions and from the most impure of pleasures, to combine in one *liaison* an even balance of soul and sense, of vice and of delicacy—and what had I got?"<sup>2</sup> At one moment, Amaury is preparing to sacrifice his amours on the altar of piety: "I required before God and before myself to take this first step toward reparation."<sup>3</sup> But a moment later all is changed: "Then began on my part a last attack, despicable, ferocious, without intoxication and without excuse, inspired by the most paltry sentiments."<sup>4</sup> The proper commentary is furnished by the hero himself: "The egotism of the sensual nature manifests itself hideously, whether it boils over in a foam of anger, or distils into stagnant and icy lees. One comes, beyond the smiling slopes, into marshy bottoms and sandy wastes."<sup>5</sup>

The romantic sentimentalist sometimes makes one sigh for Casanova. It may be that this impertinent mingling of God and godlessness is in human nature—it harbors many startling contradictions—but art is not pure reality, and beauty may well veil its face in horror in the presence of some truths.

Doubtless, the portrayal of the human heart must deal freely with its unworthy sides: Iago has his place alongside of Desdemona, as did the familiar toad at the ear of Eve; but such figures can hardly appeal to any higher instinct in us than curiosity. They are therefore viewed at a remoter focus and in a chillier fashion than more engaging characters. They excite a curiosity disquieted by a con-

<sup>2</sup> *id.* 273.

<sup>3</sup> *id.* 273.

<sup>4</sup> *id.* 275.

<sup>5</sup> *id.* 282.



stant protest. They always to some extent seem in art only necessary evils: they seem only partially adapted to its purposes. They have to draw for their interest too largely on their superior picturesqueness, and on their stimulant hostility to the free play of our sympathies—just as virtue, when too perfect, usually lacks picturesqueness and while satisfying our sympathies puts our curiosity to sleep. But vice all healthy natures detest—even in art. We do not willingly and with pleasure dive into the lees of human nature. At most we suffer them to be stirred so as to rise fitfully into the upper regions. We must know them; we cannot like them. They are not, therefore, proper matter for art, even though art finds it expedient to give them a place. It gives it only grudgingly—and no great masterpiece has ever granted them representation except upon sufferance, neither *Macbeth*, nor *Tartuffe*, nor the *Agamemnon*. “*La Cousine Bette*” does so, but it is for that very reason a rather dubious masterpiece. Sainte-Beuve says as much of “*Madame Bovary*.” “*Volupté*,” like “*La Cousine Bette*,” has the lees of human nature for its chief interest. Sensuality, love such as sensuality comports, religious excitation such as may cohabit with both, the repentance, the remorse, the relapses, the cynicism and hardness of heart that a debauched life superimposes on all the higher sentiments, the ennui, the loathing of self, the languors of unrest, the faintness of spirit and the weakness of will that cancel wisdom and rivet vice on its victim, the desolating and unhallowed gleams of insight, the impotent penetration into mysteries of motive and conduct spelled out in the dregs of the cup of pleasure, the whole panorama of this particular circle of the *Inferno* is unfolded with a mastery that makes one shudder. And not only its horror, but the questionable poetry that is incongruously intertangled with it is rendered in a manner which, inferior as it is to the more impassioned manner of the great romanticists, is of a range and a precision far beyond their reach.

Unhappily, when we reflect that all these things are seen in the glass of a single personality, that all these gleams

of light scintillate through the darkness and the chaos of a single spirit, a depressed spirit, writhing in painful impotence, we cannot but feel that we are too close to crude nature for the magical illusion of art, that there is here a pervading suggestion of morbidity, of disjointed and diseased sensation, that there is too much of nature in her contradictory and her repellent aspects to admit the serenity or to carry the edification of true poetry.

Woman, quite as much as vice, is the subject of the book. She is portrayed with the same completeness and with the same science. Every type from the purest to the least pure is presented on the stage or in the side-scenes. All varieties of woman's love, from the most ethereal and the most virginal to the most earthly, are depicted with all the shadings of sentiment that they comport; all kinds of feminine charm, womanly, wifely, maidenly, from the most devoted to the most passionate and the most coquettish, the finer beauty that poets confound with piety and the *beauté du diable* which Sainte-Beuve identifies with youth, are seized and defined with startling mastery.

Sainte-Beuve does not, as other poets and moralists instinctively do, paint love flowing in the great central channel; he prefers to study its capricious ebb and flow in the inlets and lagoons into which it insinuates its stagnant superflux. He perpetually recurs to its minor moods, its subdued and neutralized embodiments, its disguises as sympathy, affinity, friendship, its retreats from torrent passion into elegiac melancholy, into plaintive longings and murmuring renunciations. It is not love triumphant over all, but love intertangled and half identified with the whole skein of kindred or even of opposed sentiments, love, in a word, in which a romantic head is mated with an only half romantic heart. It is love hesitant, timorous, without faith in itself, crossed by countercurrents, annulled by its own weakness, and frustrated by circumstance.

This complicated overlapping of flesh and spirit, this wedge-like projection of vice upward into the region of the virtues, and of virtue downward into the region of the vices,

so unrelentingly and almost scientifically rendered, implies under the impotent human protest an ultimate fatalistic acceptance that identifies this chaos with the universal order. Human nature seems degraded to the level of an accident in which the original animal may be found grimacing even under the most idealistic disguises. Love is here nearer to Freud than to Plato. There is something cynically unscrupulous in this Mephistophelian science, only to be acquired, it would seem, by mortgaging the soul to evil. There are some illusions—if they be such—which man has not the right to dispel, because they are part of the piety of human nature, and are the things on which life itself feeds, namely the knowledge of good and evil and the reality of freedom and the moral law.

Sainte-Beuve tells us that he had attained wisdom through pleasure, and he even finds this a better vehicle than philosophy! Unhappily it is only knowledge of the weakness of human nature that is thus achieved, and not of its strength. The experience colors the wisdom, it brings with it its own sickly hue. A flaccid fatalism is in the end the inevitable recourse of human nature for conserving a last shred of its native dignity. It confounds virtue and vice by subtly interweaving and finally identifying them. It sees in them both only products of nature whose accidentally varied combinations reduce themselves to the self-same elements.

Sainte-Beuve consequently contrives to minimize, almost to destroy, the poetry of youth. "The wild beast is in us, it triumphantly dominates our first vicious years, it devours the vitals of each of us, like the savage fox that was carried under the garments of the Spartan boy."<sup>6</sup> That is the disease. "Growingly irritated, my moods responding to the gathering night and the agitation of the city streets, I shook off the preservative influence of a day purely spent, and was less on my guard against falling back into the uncleanness that beset me and renouncing there the last vestige of modesty. In the heavy apoplectic sleep that followed like a

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<sup>6</sup> *id.* 179.



punishment each guilty indulgence, no light and crystalline dream came to carry me back to the avenue with its rusty foliage ready to turn green, and to open my soul to the chaste mysteries of love.”<sup>7</sup> That is the outcome of the disease. We see here the relation of the romanticism of Chateaubriand to the naturalism of Zola. Nature itself suffers a fall and enters into the conspiracy of vice:

“This rural nature that has been so poetically extolled becomes in certain cases the auxiliary and accomplice of corrupted human nature. A benign inspirer for the most part and readily speaking to us of God, nature has nevertheless her days of evil counsel; she turns pagan again, subdued to the spell of ancient Pan and peopled with innumerable Hamadryads. A solitude too opulent with verdure and flowers is bound too often to be a perilous refuge for a youthful hermit: Jerome at first needed the frightful Chalcidian desert to offset his inner self; he more than once counsels the choice of the most arid wilderness for a dwelling-place. The great Christian painter Raphael, by an instinctive feeling of harmony and, as it were, of chastity, has never given to the distant trees in his landscapes behind the head of his Virgin more than a few leaves, so rare that we can count them.”<sup>8</sup>

Sainte-Beuve thus insists on seeing in youth only *l'âge féroce*, a sickly crisis rather than a season of superabundant physical energy and of poetical extravagance and of glad animal spirits. He sees it with the fatigued and pensive eye of the medical student who has too early kept watch on man's mortality and has learned over-curiously to descry the end of life in its beginning, and who, by thus carrying the decaying spirit of age into youth, runs the risk of paying to outraged nature the penalty of carrying the decayed spirit of youth into age. Love is pictured denuded of the poetic enthusiasm of its springtide and endowed instead with the calculating meanness that belongs to a prematurely aged heart. Amaury finds Madame de Couaën at the bedside of a child that is seriously ill: “A first inevitable

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<sup>7</sup> *id.* 143.

<sup>8</sup> *id.* 144.



thought wounded me, the thought that at this moment she would have preferred to see the doctor enter the room rather than me . . . Human love, which pretends to be so devoted, is so unjust and so exclusively preoccupied with itself that I bore her a grudge because she was so concerned and so perturbed on account of her child."<sup>9</sup>

In healthy natures there is more simplicity. The higher and the lower are more separated, if not at the outset by the clumsy hand of nature, which essays the task with very variable success, then by the surgical intervention of the will, the will to health. This will implies a wise asceticism: it takes on limitations, serves a discipline, denies one half of itself to live the purer with the other half. The voluptuary worships freedom, rejects limitations and discipline, and asserts instead of denying self—only to discover that the two selves are at war and that, unless the will intervenes, the lower prevails, puts an end to freedom, imposes its own tyrannical limitations and its own discipline of servitude, and degrades the whole self by reducing it to its animal attributes. The will to health is replaced by acquiescence in disease.

The psychology of "Volupté" is essentially that of La Rochefoucauld, applied to sentiments that interest us emotionally in proportion as they are romantic and that interest us intellectually in proportion as they are egotistic,—for the real purport of the book lies in the identification of sentiment with instinct and of instinct with voluptuous egotism. Amaury is a romantic egotist, as much so as any hero of Stendhal. He inspires conflicting feelings of sympathy and antipathy; but the latter inauspiciously predominate, because, when he feels, he feels consciously, calculatingly, and even vilely for the most part, and because he himself traces his experience down to its base origins in discreditable motives. We are therefore chiefly interested in him, as we are in Stendhal's heroes, as a sign of the times, as a painful study in gray and black. Amaury is a static version of that terribly dynamic creation of Balzac, that incarnation

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<sup>9</sup> *id.* 219-220.

of voluptuousness, Baron Hulot. He appears here in the formative instead of the confirmed stage. If Balzac had seriously executed his threat of rewriting "Volupté"—which he derided—we may guess that he would never have had Amaury turn priest, but would, with more convincingness, have had him go on as he had begun, descending ever deeper into the maëlstrom of vice.

Yet in "Volupté" the analysis is so subtle and so plausible that one would inevitably incline to accept it as true, were it not for a continuous inner protest against its cruelty. One feels that it is true for Amaury, and that it is partially true for Sainte-Beuve; one feels that it is false for humanity at large. Love without charm, youth without youthfulness, life without joy—this suggests abnormality and disease. The constant recurrence of such words as malady, fever, poison, corroborates the impression: we are studying not healthy human nature, but the *mal de René*. It differs from that of the original René in not being magnified by passion and ennobled by genius. For René's high fever it substitutes a chronic low fever, a suppressed and smouldering fire, a nerveless ennui, drifting but not acting, moved but not moving, pitiable but repellent. "Volupté" is, far more than "René," a complete and authentic study of the disease in its average phases, but it is more a treatise by a specialist than a rhapsody by a poet. It smells of the sick-room, and love and religion seem degraded to the office of bandages and liniments. The writer seems a great *docteur ès sciences amoureuses* lecturing to a band of "sawbones Werthers" in mingled terms of pathology and poetry.

What makes the book so disagreeable is not simply that it deals with an unsavory subject. That has been done by other novelists with such masterly indirection as fairly to circumvent the difficulty. The treatment is here too uncompromisingly clinical. Amaury not only experiences all kinds of love, but he experiences them simultaneously and as it were, experimentally, and each of them vies with every other in usurping the foreground; each one is portrayed with all the stigmas of experience reliving its past with a

guiltily reminiscent fervor. Lamartine was not wrong when he found the book "ill-smelling."

Of the long line of novels to which it belongs, it is nevertheless, as an intellectual curio, the most distinguished. It shows unequalled subtlety in unraveling the mysteries of feeling and in finding an endlessly rich store of words for rendering their bewildering complexity with relentless exactitude. Yet artistically this is a fault rather than a merit. We would willingly sacrifice half its exactness for a little of the charm of "René." We are hardly capable of digesting such a surfeit of science accompanied by so little charm—while beauty is its own excuse for being and can never exceed the hospitality of our senses. Poetry has a truth of its own which no amount of clinical sagacity can abrogate or replace. And so we gladly turn from this excessively knowing priest who seems to have distilled his cynical wisdom from the confessions of a thousand troubled souls to the more compelling poetry of more truly youthful spirits. They do not see love and religion through the eyes of a romanticized Santa Teresa, "*la plus sainte des amantes et la plus amante des saintes.*" The rich complexity of Sainte-Beuve's own gifts (for he is the model sitting for this portrait) had this one serious drawback: thanks to an extraordinary grace of nature on the one hand, and a culpable lack of discipline and will on the other, the better and the baser parts of his personality responded together to the challenge of experience. Touch the sensual chord and the amorous one vibrated in unison with it; touch the amorous chord and the religious one vibrated in unison with it; the result is a tripartite disharmony which makes his paganism seem half-hearted, his love sacerdotal, his piety impious. He is in a way a predecessor of Baudelaire, and more remotely, even of Barbey d'Aurevilly. Priapus and Saint Augustine sit here face to face, eyeing each other in strange inquiry and fretfully seeking what they have in common.

"Volupté" is of all Sainte-Beuve's works the one whose style is most highly wrought. It is far superior to that of the poems, though more sophisticated. They speak a lan-



guage not native to his genius. In the novel, however, since it is really an indefinitely prolonged character-painting, the language of the critic rather than that of the poet, although duly colored by poetry, was the appropriate one. In this Sainte-Beuve was not only a born adept, but long practice in writing had already developed the inborn gift to real mastery. The style is fully adequate to the exacting demands of the subject, and the fitness of phrase, the elegance and subtlety of expression are really remarkable. The writer's art is less sure in the pages where this excellent prose aspires to rise into poetry, as nearly all prose did aspire in those days when the great billows of Chateaubriand's measured periods were still rolling in so musically on all the sounding shores of literature. In the more ambitious passages the colors are sometimes a little doubtful and the metaphors a little strained or a little odd. The effort to achieve artistic effects is too apparent.

"C'est ainsi, mon ami, que, tandis qu'un diadème exagéré s'inaugurait après la tempête sous la splendeur des victoires, je suivais ma trace imperceptible à l'écart de la grande influence qui semblait tout envahir; je subissais d'autres influences plus vraies, bien profondes et directes; l'infiltration en moi des célestes rosées s'augmentait au travers du soleil de l'Empire."<sup>10</sup>

One need not be a Frenchman steeped in native tradition to feel the strenuous infelicity of such writing. It is of course only occasional, and, far oftener than in Sainte-Beuve's poetry, it is atoned for by passages in which the effort is not unrewarded by a very real success.

"Spring was coming on; already the air was balmy and the earth was clothing itself with beauty. Perilous spring-time, why, in those shining years, did you reawaken into life so often and so lovely? Like all sensitive creatures whose will is not submitted to a higher power, I have long been at the mercy of the capricious breezes, of the mobile phases of the moon, of the flitting clouds (even when I remained secluded from the sight of them) and of the warm

<sup>10</sup> *id.*, 321.



glow of the sun; even now the secret mood of my spirit is determined by these influences. On those first warm days of the year, in Paris, through whose streets poured a living tide of youthful hero-worshippers, of warriors of every kind and degree, of women risen with the dawn to exhibit, as the birds do on their outspread wings, their thousand-hued splendors, the avenues and drives were indescribably gay. At evening, when night was beginning to enwrap the swarming streets, the daughters of the people, seated in the doorways, bareheaded and bare-armed, exuberantly frolicsome under the provocation of the flood of plumes and helmets, seemed to be preparing to celebrate some festival of the *Bona Dea*; in the soft vapory evening which wreathed them with a shining lustre they all seemed clothed with beauty. If such days were to last, no human creature would be saved, for the world exists only, as a saint has said, thanks to the grace and chastity accorded to woman."<sup>11</sup>

Sainte-Beuve achieved salvation by renouncing poetry for criticism; he achieved salvation, so he hints himself, by renouncing the ambitious literary style for the easy jog-trot of the journalist (of the highly cultivated French journalist, be it understood). Such a passage as that just quoted makes one almost regret that his creative ambition did not compromise less yieldingly with his critical sagacity.

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<sup>11</sup> *id.* 274.

## VI

### THE MORALIST

Mon esprit va tout naturellement à moraliser sur toute chose.

—*Sainte-Beuve*

Sainte-Beuve is essentially and above all a man of taste. In taste we find the centre and the controlling force of his thought. He may be set down as a sceptic, a romantic dilettante, an epicurean positivist, a naturalist. Something of all this he is, but always with the hesitancy and the reservations of the man of taste, that is, discreetly, moderately, intelligently, and, for all who do not belong to too diverse a family of spirits, acceptably. His taste, so catholic as to be virtually universal in its sensitiveness, ensures salvation from all sectarian narrowness. Its preferences are never exclusive, they remain open-eyed and hospitable. He offers an example, on the grand scale, of the man of genius whose genius is compounded chiefly of taste.

The absolute sceptic can hardly be a man of taste in the highest sense. There is in the barrenness of his thought something ultimately repugnant to a sensitive imagination, which will refuse instinctively to live in the desert. Here lay the boundary of Sainte-Beuve's scepticism, in practice if not in theory. Theoretically, his materialism was, we are told, so uncompromising as to make even the boldest stand aghast. But one must not take Sainte-Beuve's theorizing too seriously. Only a fraction of his total self is behind it. In the presence of reality his theories shrink into the background and modestly refuse to measure the mysterious otherwiseness of things by their yard-stick. Like all uncompromising scepticism, that of Sainte-Beuve has the property of dissolving itself. Theoretically, the result may be negative; practically, it is positive. One could hardly set a higher value than he does, in his best moments, on the hu-

man spirit as an instrument for achieving lofty ends; and he does this not out of pure curiosity, as some have fancied, but from a very real love of its high achievements.

In analysing character and rehearsing conduct, he not only paints but he also judges the moral aspects involved; he praises or reprobates, he gives the lie at every turn to any narrow determinism. He lays an emphasis on morality and on wisdom, that implies a profound faith in the possibilities of human nature, a faith that is incompatible with a genuine scepticism. He is so much a moralist that he even condescends to point with fervor some of the most trite of bourgeois moralities. It suffices for him that they be true and opportune. "Marriage," he says, "is a great burden, but it is also a method of hoping . . . One lives again, one is rejuvenated, and every grandparent, leaning over the cradle of a grandchild, comprehends better than a philosopher or a great moralist the sweet renewal of the bond that connects the successive generations in the eternal recommencement of the world."<sup>1</sup> One must indeed be thoroughly convinced of such time-honored truths to venture to rehearse them.

He writes on La Fare, that most indolent of poets, and ends with the moral that indolence is a very poor programme of life. He writes of Chaulieu, La Fare's brother poet, and he cannot resist the impulse to repeat the same moral. He writes of Piron, and ends by pointing out the weakness of poetry that sets good manners and good morals at naught. He writes of Villon with such pronounced disgust for the seamy side of his life and of his poetry that the post-Victorian reader would be utterly disconcerted at such flagrant introduction of moral standards into the judgment of poetry. He writes on Ninon, and ends by warning young ladies of the danger of imitating her ways. And on a higher and less obvious plane, how constant is his reluctance to compromise with moral inferiority even when allied with genius! It is not alone the fastidious man of taste that protests. The intermittent sceptic proves to be a perpetual

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<sup>1</sup> CL 4-558.

moralist. The perfection of refinement which made him so superlatively a man of taste has lent a purity and a glow to his imaginative vision that elevate taste almost into morality. Good taste is for him at bottom a taste for the good. He prided himself on love of truth as his prime virtue. His love of excellence in every form was equally fundamental. And he habitually found that moral excellence is in some way bound up with the other forms of excellence—which is the mark of the moralist both in the broader French sense, a student of human nature, and in the narrower English sense, a sympathetic connoisseur in the struggle of good and evil in the human heart. He does not, like many critics, portray man objectively. His fundamental opposition to Flaubert's doctrine of impersonality lay exactly here: it tended to exclude the moralist in the name of scientific and impartial observation. He objects to the sensual incitation which was an inevitable consequence of the author's method.

"He should absolutely have stopped short of this," he says of "*Madame Bovary*." "A book, after all, is not and can never be reality itself. . . The book, in all ways, bears the imprint of the hour when it appeared. Although begun, it is said, several years ago, it appears at its opportune moment. It is just the book to read after listening to the clear-cut and steely dialogue of the younger Dumas, or after applauding '*Les Faux Bonshommes*,' or between two articles of Taine. For, in many things and under many forms, I believe I recognize the symptoms of the new literature: science, the spirit of observation, maturity, power, and a little hardness. Such are the qualities which the leaders of the new generation seem to affect. A son and brother of distinguished physicians, M. Gustave Flaubert wields the pen as others do the scalpel. Anatomists and physiologists, I meet you everywhere."<sup>2</sup>

Yet the morality of a sceptical man of taste is hardly apt to exceed the limits of a refined epicureanism, though enjoying the happy privilege now and then, in its impulses

<sup>2</sup> CL 13-360, 363.



of enthusiasm, of forgetting itself and temporarily renouncing its own nature. Morality, when grounded on nothing more solid than taste touched with imagination, is more nearly akin to pagan than to Christian models, and among them it is in more intimate sympathy with Horace than with Marcus Aurelius. Stoicism is the philosophy of those who think nobly, epicureanism is the philosophy of those who think sceptically. Sainte-Beuve, applying his sceptical wits to the stoic fallacy, readily felt that for all its elevation it was over-rigid, "nobly ambitious, but a little outside of nature." He is by no means unfriendly to nobility of temper; a spirit so naturally distinguished recoiled from a too gross acceptance of the epicurean fallacy. But within the nice bounds of a very delicate propriety, and with due respect for all the spiritual pieties from which he stood remote, he looked on life and letters in a genially Horatian manner, interfused with tints and gleams of a more lofty and religious conception of things, and even quickened from time to time by a not wholly congruous and not long sustained *sursum corda*. In general, his morality suffers a central chill from the lack of sanction and authority; it reflects the coloring of the day and hour, and half succumbs to fatalism; it halts between the stoical strenuousness that circumstance so often demands and the epicurean relaxation that nature so constantly craves; it cannot, in short, bring down its ideal to the level of actual experience or lift up reality to the level of its ideal. It is full of contradictions and of disillusionment, and, thanks to Sainte-Beuve's extraordinary gift for moral analysis, of sagacious wisdom.

He never put his house in order morally. He never made an abiding moral choice, either in theory or in practice. In both of these the low and the high points are separated by an invidious interval. His ideals secretly contradict his current preoccupations and moods. His taste, indeed, usually effects a sifting and a separation, but not his will. And thus we find him, generally so sound morally, championing Feydeau's "Fanny"!

We find him also, in a moment of unusual revolt not only from convention but, one is tempted to add, from good sense itself, advocating the odd notion that the widows of illustrious men, of Condorcet, for example, or of Napoleon's marshals, are justified and even laudable, being still in the age of passion, if out of fidelity to a great name they refuse to alter it by a second marriage, but take instead of a husband a friend constant, faithful, and discreet. *Où est en cela le mal?* he asks.<sup>3</sup> He is quite as ready to absolve Marie-Antoinette, if, as he suspects, she had "in the troubled and hostile atmosphere of court-life, confided herself to some friend, upright, trusty, devoted and faithful." Not for that, he pleads, should she lose any ground in the esteem of those who know the human heart and who know life.<sup>4</sup> It is plain that as a moralist Sainte-Beuve is not uniformly for stoical renunciation. He says as much: "There is no question in all this of blaming or praising; I am less disposed and less authorized than any one else to set up as one of the moralists who condemn; I am very well content for my part to be of the order of those who observe and reveal."<sup>5</sup> This is over-modest, and the modesty is not of a very high sort. The great moralists do not carry their knowledge so lightly and do not eschew the responsibility of judging in favor of "observing and revealing."

Sainte-Beuve was not able to establish any abiding harmony between his very reasonable but not at all roseate conception of human nature and the high hopes for humanity which formed the substance of that "new morality and justice, not less solid than the old, more solid even,"<sup>6</sup> of which he invoked the coming. He sees everywhere a discouraging animality and brutality. He recognizes that the least scrupulous have scored the definitive triumphs in history. "Let us dare to avow it, it is thanks to this knowledge and to the evil employment of it that the world is governed and has been governed hitherto."<sup>7</sup> At the same time he feels that the

<sup>3</sup> NL 5-431 (note).

<sup>4</sup> NL 8-316.

<sup>5</sup> PC 5-295.

<sup>6</sup> Corr. 2-188.

<sup>7</sup> PC 5-249.

good that neutralizes the evil can come only from what is in itself good, and that "serious esteem and respect for humanity are the basis of all generous and liberal politics."<sup>8</sup> Yet he views with continual surprise the meanness and stupidity of mankind and their hard and thankless nature; he finds them envious, excessive, always either oppressed or oppressing:<sup>9</sup> "What is perhaps most characteristic of men in the mass, and what continues always to astonish even those who think they know them best, is not so much their wickedness or their madness (they fall into it only by fits and starts); what is most amazing and most inexhaustible in them is their moral meanness and their moral vulgarity."<sup>10</sup>

Something of this inherent deformity he finds only too often even in the finest natures; it should never surprise one, he says. "Montaigne, La Rochefoucauld, Molière and La Bruyère would not be amazed at this, and would no doubt only shrug their shoulders with a smile of bitter irony, saying: 'Such is the species!'"<sup>11</sup> "Human morals are not what the sages and the noble spirits make them in their studious and leisurely speculations on the promontory of Sunium or in the gardens of the Academy. It is a bitter day in life when one is constrained to acknowledge the triumph of force over right, of Hobbes over Plato. Whoever has come into close contact with life, either publicly or privately, has known such a day."<sup>12</sup>

Yet Sainte-Beuve does not resign himself, with the easy indifference of so many sceptics, to this moral mediocrity. He turns away from Plato and the idealists, but he continues to see them in profile, and to echo them. They furnish his standards, if not his theories. The chill is not permanent; the sacred fire is not extinct, it smoulders under the ashes. Let a breath descend on it from above, and it is rekindled. In his better moments Sainte-Beuve parts company with La Rochefoucauld.

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<sup>8</sup> PL 3-260.

<sup>9</sup> CL 15-407.

<sup>10</sup> CL 2-363.

<sup>11</sup> PR 1-33.

<sup>12</sup> CL 2-395.



He possesses that minor virtue which is so honorable a badge of distinction in those whose vision of humanity is too exact—or too exacting—to comport the major virtue of self-denying devotion, he is indulgent. He possesses that tolerant and kindly and, in his opinion, somewhat rare indulgence, “which ought to subsist, in spite of everything, among decent folk, among all those who have read and relished Horace.” He admits in human nature a Platonic instinct which seems to remember that a god has fashioned it and which forgets that he fashioned it out of clay. It is true that Sainte-Beuve forgets it in a very romantic fashion: “Woe to him, it has been said, who has not once at any rate been in love! And woe to him, who, in matters of thought, has not, once at any rate, been madly stoical or blindly Platonic, or wildly peripatetic, or even something different, but something lofty, thrilling, and arduous. He has not known the flaming summits of the spirit.”

This is, no doubt, more specious than just, and one inclines to ask whether one cannot achieve the summits without passing through a burning zone. Was Zeno madly stoical? Were Plato and Aristotle ever *éblouis*, and *forcenés*? If feeling is interwoven even into the most exalted and divinely serene philosophy, is not such feeling in its essence divinely serene also, and not even remotely akin to the mad fervors here hinted? Sainte-Beuve has moments, not habitual, of abandonment to feeling, when a little vein of Diderot filters into his thought. Yet even these ardors testify to an upward slant in his epicurean philosophy; they even prove, what they do not prove in Diderot, the fine grain of his nature. But he is dealing in these moments of aspiration with premonitions of experience rather than with experience that he has realized. The mood they bespeak is a more intimate one than it was in Diderot, and has more deeply colored his thought. Yet, like the sentimentalists generally, Sainte-Beuve is reduced to the vain hope that genuine elevation of spirit may be derived from what is most fleeting and fragile in man, his mood of romantic enthusiasm. He does not even hope that the mood may



last in its purity—it evidently seems to him a little outside of nature—and enduring heroism and sanctity he would regard, like genius, as a special gift of grace which man either has or has not.

It is not the merely curious Sainte-Beuve that agitates these moral questions. It is not for the sake of initiation into the moral mysteries of alien souls that he seeks this personal contact with the highest human experiences. It is because he feels that after all the corrections and retractions of good-sense and of experience, something of the sacred dream will remain to perfume even one's most secular thought. As a perfume it remained in his thought and his work, much as we may miss it in the lower curves of his sinuous life.

"Two great men of the eighteenth century," he says, "Montesquieu and Buffon, the latter especially, were great libertines in their youth and even subsequently; but each had what Duclos did not even dream of, an ideal; there was an elevated portion of their natures which dominated the storms of the senses and never allowed itself to be submerged. It was in the serenity of this intellectual Olympus that Montesquieu and Buffon, during long hours of silent meditation, contemplated the supreme goal of life and measured by it their majestic plans and slowly reared their monument. Each of them had his strenuous Muse."<sup>13</sup> Sainte-Beuve too had his strenuous Muse and wrought during long years at his monument, and he too should be considered chiefly as an immortal builder. A side-glance at the waywardness of the mortal man is enough to rescue the inscription on his monument from the falsity of an epitaph. Let it not degenerate, through insistence on the minor strain, into a libel. His life was consecrated to the Muse, and she in her turn has consecrated it. The service was whole-hearted, all that was best in the man went into it—and he has a right to be judged by it, like his illustrious predecessors, in whom, with eyes purged by time and distance, we see only the great naturalist and the great publi-

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<sup>13</sup> CL 9-213.

cist. Let us not resemble the *badaud* who, after hearing the great pulpit orator of his day, remembered only that he took snuff in the temple.

This homage to contradictory moral conceptions appears conspicuously in Sainte-Beuve's attitude toward La Rochefoucauld. At times he seems to accept without reservations the extreme consequences of the doctrine of universal self-love, and, like La Rochefoucauld himself, to see in every virtue only cunning disguises of this omnipresent Proteus. The "Maximes" are his *livre de chevet*, his compendium of the whole science of human nature, a book which, intimately comprehended, became a landmark between his youth and his maturity.

"Everybody, do what he may, carries his own final interest into his judgments, I mean his secret ideal, composed of his ego subtilized, quintessentialized, and raised to the highest degree and to the level of the sublime. We do not recognize ourselves therein directly, yet under this form and this idea, we continue to see and to mirror ourselves, and to adore ourselves . . . And thus we judge, we cut and carve according to our own pattern, everything that we handle. And I myself, to begin with, who am writing here, if I take pleasure every moment in shattering the mould in which I might be tempted to take a fixed shape, if I force myself to like what is foreign to me, and even the very opposite of what I am, it is not through detachment from my ego; it is because I pride myself perhaps on being no one thing in particular, and because I love myself better apparently in this broken, multiform, and fleeting apparition than in any other. No, no, my worthy folk, La Rochefoucauld, rightly understood, is not so easy to refute as you fancy."<sup>14</sup>

Yet there are times when Sainte-Beuve himself sets about refuting him! There is in Sainte-Beuve something which resists, which even protests, because the theory of self-love pushed to its extreme point leaves him profoundly dissatisfied. Let La Rochefoucauld show that the ego sits

<sup>14</sup> NL 5-390.

enthroned at the centre of every human act, and he assents: 'tis true, 'tis pity, and pity 'tis, 'tis true. But let the theory be applied with unrelenting rigor, let the cynical philosopher say, and, given his theory, with unimpeachable logic, that friendship is a *traffic* or *commerce*, and Sainte-Beuve at once cries out that this is "insulting, odious, and ugly." Sainte-Beuve's divergence from La Rochefoucauld is very real and significant—as much so as his adherence. "Why should we give ourselves up to such ardent admiration for these men who so deeply despised their fellows, and who believed that the supreme art of governing them consisted solely in making dupes of them,"<sup>15</sup> he exclaims when confronted by the representatives of cynical statecraft. His revolt is not less profound in the presence of the cynical moralists; he protests against the defamation of human nature in one after another of them from Charron down to Chamfort. He protests against it at every turn in the literature of his own day; it is almost the chief indictment that he brings against this literature after it has passed from romanticism to realism. This revolt is not a sentimental caprice. It is rooted in his character and is related to his fundamental modes of thinking and feeling. He is perhaps more important as a corrector than as an advocate of the "immoral moralist," although he plays both parts.

That is decidedly a contradiction, but is it not a pleasing contradiction, whose defiance of strict logic does honor to Sainte-Beuve's heart? It is not in vain that one achieves through perfection of taste a constant feeling for what is excellent: it may preserve one at times from slanderous human nature. It preserved Sainte-Beuve from drifting into cynicism; it even assigned as a terminus for his wandering thought a culmination that is noble and that has in it an implicit recognition of the sublime and the ideal. He did not revert in spirit, despite theoretic returns, to the crude sensualism of his twentieth year. The delight he takes in a noble or a magnanimous action, in a finely moral utterance, or in a truly great career, as well as in all those

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<sup>15</sup> CL 2-255.



sides of man's nature which give to human intercourse its amenity and even its significance, prove that his homage to morality is no merely conventional one. He belongs with such writers as Terence and Goldsmith, with those choice spirits whose most vital charm is an exquisite *humanitas*, so exquisite that it readily allies itself in tone and spirit, if not in will and in action, with those still finer forces which humanity has embodied in its religions. And to say this in a study of Sainte-Beuve is far more to the point than to dilate *ad nauseam* on the seamy side of his conduct and on the dislike he expressed for certain not very likeable contemporaries. He carried into the contemplation of life the finest spirit of letters, somewhat as did Cicero, whom he so much admired. That spirit carries with it, in this high form, all that constitutes the choicest flower of human culture. Reality itself, when ushered into its presence, loves to appear with a little *endimanchement*. Sainte-Beuve differs in a measure from some of his masters, who were in this respect more detached than himself. Montaigne, with humorous realism, says that old age changes us only for the worse, giving more vices than it takes away, and writing more wrinkles in our souls than on our brows, so that one sees few men or none that in growing old do not smell sour or musty. Though Sainte-Beuve was sufficiently romantic to regard youth as the crown and glory of life, he cannot suffer old age to be thus slandered without a word of protest. Of Stendhal, who lamented as a woeful misfortune the approach of his fiftieth year, he says: "He was quite of the same mind as the Greek poet, who says that a man must be mad to lament the loss of life and not to lament the loss of youth. He did not hold that more austere and arduous doctrine which exalts and perfects the soul in age, the doctrine which was that of Dante, Milton, Haydn, Beethoven, Poussin, Michael Angelo, and which, though one should see nothing more in it than a sublime device, would still be a blessing."<sup>16</sup> He makes his study of Bonstetten an almost lyrical glorification of old age sagely maintaining it-

<sup>16</sup> CL 9-312.



self green and vigorous despite the affronts of time. And he himself, if we allow for the very different coloring of his temperament, makes a very creditable showing in his last years. If he succeeded, it was because he imported a certain moral concern into his notions of conduct. When Madame du Châtelet sets down as an axiom that "we have nothing to do in this world but to seek sensations and agreeable sentiments," he protests: "This may be true philosophically, but, presented in this manner and thus crudely, such a theorem has an immoral and even physical suggestiveness that offends and almost shocks."<sup>17</sup> It is his taste rather than his judgment that is shocked; and we see once more just how far—and no farther—that fine faculty can serve him morally. Even epicureanism must for him make some show of modesty and decorum, it must be exquisite, not flaunting, not boldly materialistic—and in its exquisiteness, it is evident, he secretly hopes to find a corrective for its excesses. Though he aimed at introducing physiology into criticism, no one could have protested more loudly than he did when genius was reduced to mere temperament:

"Without intending in any way to deny the interrelations of the physical and the moral, I cannot but protest against what seems an exaggeration of the physiologic explanation of genius. The intellect has usually a loftier seat than the abdomen, and Gall, no less than Homer, locates it in the middle of the forehead, above the eyebrows, as on a throne. Unhappily, it is only too true that in our day many a youthful author has sought his whole inspiration in the ardor of his blood and in the vehemence of his desires; the talent of the new generation has been all too soon transferred into their temperament and has confined itself there. And what has been the result? They have combined the poet and the debauchee, and each has been exhausted along with the other. At the age when genius ought to be in its prime and its fecund maturity, they have played the spendthrift with nature and are holding out their arms in supplication

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<sup>17</sup> CL 2-279.

to the Muse who flees from them even faster than their youth. O Dante! O Milton! you who put forth the finest fruit of your genius when old age was already imminent, what would have become of you under this epicurean dispensation?"<sup>18</sup>

This omnipresent good taste is tempered to an enduring solidity by its alliance with an equally omnipresent good sense. Good sense is the good taste of the intellect. If the latter is weak, we get a pure dilettante; if it is strong, we get at least a dilettante moralist—who will appear a dilettante only when measured by the most strenuous standards and against the most majestic figures. It may be more just in Sainte-Beuve's case to say, a humanistic moralist. As such, he detests a morose disaffection toward humanity. Chamfort is merely La Rochefoucauld with the implied cynicism thrown into bold relief. Sainte-Beuve denounces with horror these "atrocious and corrosive thoughts that seem to burn the very paper they are written on." He denies Chamfort the right to say such things either to mankind at large or to the individual. When Chamfort says: "Man is a silly animal, to judge by myself," he retorts: "Speak for yourself!"<sup>19</sup> That is the protest of the *honnête homme*. Extreme cynicism, like extreme epicureanism, revolts him. He finds both of these in such a play as the "Mariage de Figaro." This idol of the Parisian play-goer, which has seduced generation after generation by its wit and its charm, does not seduce him. He condemns it on moral grounds! Let genius perform what miracles it may, in his more strenuous mood he will not concede that literature may ignore morals.

Here, as everywhere, he stands remote from his disciple Taine. The abyss that separates them is revealed in the single phrase in which he censures the popular doctrine, derived from Diderot, that the passions are the measure of our strength and our energy.<sup>20</sup> The naturalists are not in Sainte-Beuve's good graces when they speak thus, nor the

<sup>18</sup> PC 5-139.

<sup>19</sup> CL 4-556.

<sup>20</sup> CL 13-305.

whole family of Stendhal and Mérimée, nor the romantic group. In the same spirit, Sainte-Beuve protests against the dictum that the primary condition for being a psychologist is to be infirm in health—and therefore studious of self and of the inner life. Such a motive, he holds, is not to be maintained in regard to any true science. An utterance of this kind separates Sainte-Beuve by a great gulf from his later contemporaries Flaubert and the Goncourts, and in general the whole band of those who exploited their nerves and who introduced into literature that very physiology which Sainte-Beuve boasted of having introduced into criticism! In his work, these naturalistic outcroppings are thrown against such a healthy background of humanism that they are largely corrected and often wholly transformed. The sixteenth century, for example, was for Stendhal and Mérimée and Taine the object of a cult. They had an inordinate admiration for its passionate humanity, and they romantically exalted its passionate energy, great even in crime—great above all in crime, Stendhal used to say. Sainte-Beuve finds that age excessive and abnormal, *un siècle affreux*. He judges the “human plant,” as Taine calls it, not by the opulence of its bloom but by the beneficent or the malefic quality of its fruits. “In a single year,” says Taine, “there were 1400 murders in Ghent; energy is so intense there that it survives all evils and is adequate to every effort.” Mérimée despises French sentiment and glorifies the trans-Pyrenean passion, in which love is first cousin to murder, and burns most brightly among really interesting human beings such as bandits, smugglers, and gypsies. Stendhal exults in the number of murders committed by such bandits as Mandrin, and opposes their “energy worthy of Plutarch” to the dull orderliness of modern life. Flaubert cherishes an undying regret that he did not live in the age of Nero or Heliogabalus. Compare with all this mad extravagance the satisfaction expressed by Sainte-Beuve at not being born into “those times of violence, of treason, and of iniquity,” and at living instead in an age when “a certain diffused morality and humane



respect for opinion, when the penal code also, and especially the continuous pressure of public opinion, forbid even to the most audacious those criminal resolutions which every human heart, if left to itself, is always tempted to conceive." Sainte-Beuve speaks like a moralist who loves civilization, and who weighs and judges the actions of men by their conformity to it; the others speak as *littérateurs*, greedy for copy, and as lovers of the picturesque at any price. One day, and it was a day when Sainte-Beuve announced that he had no desire whatever to say agreeable things, he bluntly cried out: "I venture to assert, without fear of being refuted, that Byron and de Sade (I beg pardon for bracketing the two together) have been perhaps the two principal inspirers of our modern writers, the one openly and visibly, the other in a clandestine manner, and not so very clandestine either."<sup>21</sup> That is not very different from the tone of Tennyson who reproached his age for importing poisoned honey from the hives of France:

Set the maiden fancies wallowing in the troughs of Zolaism.

Yet Sainte-Beuve was, it must be granted, not exactly Victorian. He was himself too indelibly imbued with that stream of eighteenth century license which de Sade sat in and added to, from which Byron sprang, and which the Victorians tried to stem with a success perhaps all too precarious. Sainte-Beuve has plenty of moral sympathy, but a paucity of moral convictions. The notion, which is a part of his creed of universal curiosity, that experience is always worth while, makes him, in his less strenuous moods, far more tolerant of error than a stricter moralist would dream of being. We must dare to go to the farthest limits, even at the risk of being less estimable morally, he says.<sup>22</sup> It is especially in regard to woman that he inclines to countenance this inquisitive laxity. Mirabeau, whose curiosity took a different turn (on occasion), once played highwayman in his search for novel sensation—so runs the story. Strict

<sup>21</sup> PC 3-430.

<sup>22</sup> NL 9-294.



logic would demand sanction even for this and other violent departures from the ten commandments. Sainte-Beuve, in spite of his hatred for "the odious race of Don Juans," is a little too much concerned with the embargo imposed on experience and knowledge by the seventh commandment. "Talent," he says, "is a plant that takes root and thrives in the soil of virtue, but which sometimes shoots up above and beyond it; it is but rarely that it belongs wholly to it at the time when it bursts into bloom; it is only in the breath of passion that it yields all its perfume."<sup>23</sup> We are here very far from Tennyson and the Victorian conventions; it would now be for Byron to applaud. It is symptomatic of the lack of fixed anchorage in Sainte-Beuve's nature that he should pay even temporary tribute to this favorite fallacy of every successive generation of youthful talents. When youthful genius—let us use the most flattering word—shoots up above and beyond virtue, or, in plainer English, has in it a strain of license, it is only too evident usually that it is youth and not genius that is the cause. Most young geniuses think they have reached the bottom of things when in reality they are only diving headlong into the sedimentary slime that hides it. Sainte-Beuve indulged in this error when he imagined that he was achieving wisdom and illumination from the satiety that follows pleasure. His real wisdom lies elsewhere; in this wayward mood he is not really edifying. The most edifying thing he says on this subject is that the illumination thus gained dissolves the will and saps the springs of the inner life. In that case common sense disposes of this whole philosophy with the query: *Cui bono?*

Such theorizing identifies wisdom with disillusion and implies a questioning and even a negative attitude toward virtue itself. In his study of Fromentin's "Dominique," a biographical novel in which the hero, at the height of his passion, tears himself away from a temptation to which he fears to succumb, Sainte-Beuve objects that the novel is departing from actual experience (it happened that he

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<sup>23</sup> CL 15-31.

guessed right). A passion at its culmination, he holds, is irresistible, and drowns all protest. Conscience and remorse may speak afterwards, but afterwards only.<sup>24</sup> If so, their spiritual utility is sadly curtailed, and a really respectable passion is incurable.

In his "Volupté" he had set up religion as a cure for libertinism. Later he shifts his ground in a rather discouraging fashion: "There is no real remedy for libertinism (at the age when one, as they say, settles down to the serious business of life) except in work, in an incessant occupation, in having some object, some great object if possible."<sup>25</sup> It is outer activity, work in the vulgar sense, not inner and spiritual travail, to which Sainte-Beuve looks for help. He has abandoned moral therapeutics for moral hygiene. In despair of an inner change, the groping physician proposes, as it were, a change of air. "The best cure for a passion," he says again, "is to inoculate oneself with another, to practice what in medicine is called the substitutive method."<sup>26</sup> That is no doubt a shrewd interpretation of a vast amount of average (and mediocre) human experience—but no true moralist will rest satisfied to have such incurable mediocrity set down as the last word of the matter.

If we accept it, we stand in the shadow of an inexorable determinism. Sainte-Beuve moves in and out of this shadow in a very perplexing fashion. His delicate moral sensitiveness requires an atmosphere of freedom; his spirit perpetually rises on the wing, while at the same time his formal interpretation of experience narrows the limits of its flight to a cruel circle of fatality. "The original bent is always retained, the pronounced trait which has shown itself unveiled in youth transforms itself, disguises itself, accommodates itself, but it reproduces itself, and remains in the end inevitable and incorrigible."<sup>27</sup>

There we have Sainte-Beuve's idea in dogmatic form. He applies it to Nodier, that early butterfly that preceded the advent of the romantic song-birds. Nodier had begun

<sup>24</sup> NL 7-196.

<sup>25</sup> Corr. 2-80.

<sup>26</sup> NL 7-402.

<sup>27</sup> PL 1-462.

by writing somewhat crude stories with lugubrious dénouements—a tribute doubtless, to the Germanic exoticism that characterized the opening century rather than an expression of temperamental bias. Sainte-Beuve however, taking it more seriously, assumes that this romantic Wertherism is innate, and sees its reappearance in the tragic turn that the later Nodier gives so gratuitously even to his most amiable tales. Experience will furnish plenty of examples to corroborate this view of the essentially unchanging nature of man; will it not furnish as many examples of its essential changefulness? Sainte-Beuve himself, to begin with, the man of metamorphoses, covered the whole interval from the morbid Joseph Delorme to the Goethean critic of the *Lundis*; and the romantic author of Werther likewise evolved into the marble deity of the post-Italian period. Reduced to proper proportions, all that this seemingly fatalistic synthesis of human nature amounts to is the perception that the intangible unity into which all the strands of a personality merge is recognizable from first to last through all its phases of transformation. It is like the individual voice, still recognizable as the same, though culture may transform it from a mere scrannel pipe into the golden organ of a prima donna. It remains inevitably the same, but its transformations prove that it is also corrigible. But while Sainte-Beuve changed intellectually in an almost surprising degree, he changed very little morally. Those in whom the will is weak, and who therefore are slow to shed the original blemishes of their nature, are inclined to be sceptical of the possibilities of moral growth—they do not find them exemplified in themselves. Sainte-Beuve retained rather than increased his natural virtues; he also retained rather than increased his natural weaknesses. By nature he was more sensitive than strong. He had an innate admiration, accompanied by very little emulative zeal, for the virtues that he lacked. It was natural that this stationary morality should beget the feeling that we come into the world charged with a certain quantum of moral energy, and that we cannot exceed an original and predestined measure of performance.



“The true epicureans,” he says, “those who have gone to the very bottom of their theory, strike me as living unchanged to the very end, and dying so, barring concessions to mere custom.” He concludes that the Chevalier de Méré, who died as a good Christian, was therefore never a thorough-going epicurean of the sect of La Rochefoucauld, Saint-Evremond, and Ninon.<sup>28</sup> This hazardous theory is, no doubt, only too frequently verified in the lives of epicureans—since pleasure, as Sainte-Beuve has told us, saps the will and dries up the springs of the inner life. It is not less frequently belied by the lives of the strenuous.

The unity of human nature, which subsists behind its changing qualities, is what Sainte-Beuve in his physiological explanations refuses to recognize. Those qualities that remain inevitable and incorrigible seem to be in his eyes human nature itself, and the unity that we conceive as enthroned above them is only their golden dream about themselves, a baseless fancy on which self-love erects its visionary religion and enjoys a fantastic godhead in which it contrives to be at once the votary that worships and the deity that is worshipped. “Monsieur de Rémusat,” says Sainte-Beuve, “has certainly in him something of the sceptic, something of the mocker, and he is, moreover, a lover of the truth, and has had on certain days, and still has, that marvellous love of which Cicero, echoing Plato, has spoken. Which of these two opposites dominates in him? Which, in fine, is the more prominent when we analyse him? Is it the solid or the shifting substance? You believe that it is the shifting ground, but is there not a background more solid behind it? You believe it is the solid ground, but is there not behind it a background still more fleeting? There is the final problem. Who can speak this last word as to others? Who knows it even as to himself? Often (if I dared to say it) there is no real background in us, there are only surfaces *ad infinitum*.”<sup>29</sup> Is not that to reduce man, in Sainte-Beuve’s own words, to “the most fleeting of illusions in the bosom of the infinite Illusion?”

<sup>28</sup> PL 3-109.

<sup>29</sup> PL 3-328.



Sainte-Beuve was as conscious as any of his critics could be of the lack of a centre to impart coherence and fixity to his moral ideas, and he was not less conscious of the contradictions that resulted between his higher and his lower moods. He accepted these contradictions, and very logically, as inherent in the scepticism of a thinker who questions all beliefs and the foundations of all beliefs, and yet at the same time clings to his moral birthright and refuses to class himself as only the most ingenious of the animals. On the other hand, this sceptical student of mankind, steeped in La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyère, and rejecting Rousseau in favor of Voltaire and Montesquieu, born in the wake of the great Revolution and caught in the swell of two or three subsequent ones, was quite as keenly aware of the dangers to which human nature is liable when adrift on the shoreless sea of scepticism. He recognizes that "the sort of incredulity that we designate by the word scepticism is easily insinuated by loose living."<sup>30</sup> He has little of Diderot's optimistic confidence in the goodness of nature. When the inaugurators of the French Revolution are spoken of as *angels of peace*, he sagaciously remarks: "It was because men believed too readily that angels of peace were scattered over all the earth that so many crimes became possible. Let us never imagine men too good, for fear that we may be obliged presently to esteem them too bad."<sup>31</sup> He realizes that civilization is a veneer with barbarism as its solid background. He recognizes that man stands in constant need of every kind of substitute for the strait-jacket. Speaking of the Pacha Bonneval, the eccentric Frenchman turned Turk, he says: "His example proves, it would seem, that we need some centre, some principle, I will even say some prejudice, in life; discipline, subordination, religion, patriotism, nothing is too much, and we must keep something at least of all these, some guarantee against ourselves."<sup>32</sup>

In his more sceptical mood he felt that the most powerful of these props had given way too completely to be of real

<sup>30</sup> CL 10-314.

<sup>31</sup> CL 10-367.

<sup>32</sup> CL 5-521.

service henceforth. He inclined, in transitory revulsions of hope, to the belief that the modern spirit, backed by the vested good sense of mankind, might slowly but surely replace religion: "I understand very well the social theory which finds that a people without religion is a decadent people. But to raise that question is idle: we are no longer free. Whether we deplore it or not, faith is dead; science, whatever men may say, has undermined it; for vigorous and sensible minds steeped in history, trained to criticism, and versed in the natural sciences, it is no longer possible to believe in the old legends and the old Bibles. In this crisis, there is but one escape from a languishing and sluggish decadence: to march on quickly and firmly toward a new order, toward ideas that are reasonable, plausible, logical, and which lead to convictions if not to beliefs . . . There is slowly rising a new ethics and a new justice, not less solid than the old, more solid even, because they will have discarded all the puerile terrors of the childhood of man . . . We must choose between Byzantinism and true progress."<sup>33</sup> That is the inevitable faith, such as it is, in which the sceptic must take refuge if he is to escape from the quagmire of pessimism. But if he is not only a sceptic but a penetrating moralist as well, how precarious this refuge is, and how near neighbor to despair is its occupant! "When activity relaxes and when the torrent of life dies down, one involuntarily suffers a poignant and deep-seated discouragement as one considers how vain are the opinions of the great majority of mankind, and how futile is every effort to reform them; if you prop them up on one side, they collapse on the other. It would suffice, verily, to make one turn Christian, were one not a naturalist."<sup>34</sup> Sainte-Beuve even dwells on the danger of too close an alliance between doctrine and practice when moving in the region of an unchartered liberty. "We must not expressly adapt our whole doctrine and direct it to the side toward which we lean. It must serve us as a counterpoise, and not as a weight added to that of our temperament, of our senses, and of our

<sup>33</sup> Corr. 2-187.

<sup>34</sup> Corr. 2-148.

secret weaknesses, as if we feared that we might not fall soon enough.”<sup>35</sup> In Sainte-Beuve’s anxious search, during so many years of experimental living and thinking, for a counterpoise in religion or in a noble philosophy, one may see a futile attempt to checkmate or balance the epicurean tendencies of his temperament. One of the profoundest of modern thinkers has said: “That so shrewd an observer as Sainte-Beuve could find no firm anchorage for the spirit in the movements peculiar to this century may in the long run turn out to be not to his discredit, but to the discredit of the century. It may become apparent that something was omitted in the whole nineteenth century view of life and that this something is the keystone of the arch.”\* Sainte-Beuve is, on the other hand, accused by Faguet of having been an apostle of scepticism to his age. He only paid it back in its own coin. In general the age gets—or takes—from its men of genius what it gives to them. It is evident that Sainte-Beuve’s age conspired with his own native tendencies and afforded him no help. Such help as he got came less from the present than from the past. The experience of mankind through the ages, however much it might seem opposed to his dissolvent scepticism, was for him too precious to be relinquished—rather, it was his final arbiter. In his better moods, and they are his commoner ones, the moral point of view triumphs: “Nature and its primitive impulsion count for much, I will even admit that they count for everything in the beginning; but the use we make of them and the wise direction of our lives become more important as we advance toward maturity, and, in this second period, the definitive character of talent, its final form, is profoundly marked by the remnants of the past which we carry with us and which weigh on us even when we least notice them . . . If the artist has led a disordered life, if he has lived a drifting life, at the beck and call of caprice and pleasure, what is the usual result when this first genial heat, this first unstinted gratuity of nature, is spent? . . . Talent insensibly deteriorates, not in technical details (in these

<sup>35</sup> CL 10-408.

\* Irving Babbitt: “The Masters of Modern French Criticism,” page 183.



his skill is often enhanced), but in his choice of subjects, in the nature of his thought and of his images, in the subtle perversity or the moral disorder of his pictures. If he is conscious of the secret malady which he harbors in his breast, and of his moral miscarriage, will he have the strength, or will he even conserve the desire, to escape from it? . . . In a word, the key of many a poet's career, in this second phase of his development, might be found in this close bond between his art and his life." The one insurance against miscarriage, he adds, is for talent to make "a sure and quick transit, when youth has passed, into the haven of a virtuous maturity."

That is homespun bourgeois morality, such as any surviving Victorian might preach to the younger generation who have learned to despise it in the name of that "new morality" which has been baptised before being born, and which incredulous elders are still waiting to behold in bodily form. It is the pervading presence of this same old-fashioned morality, the only one, it is to be feared, that has ever existed, that distinguished the great literature of the age of Louis XIV from that of the nineteenth century. It would be a hazardous thesis to maintain that Corneille, Racine, Molière, Boileau, Bossuet, Fénelon, La Rochefoucauld, La Bruyère had more of sheer genius than Chateaubriand, Hugo, Lamartine, Musset, Balzac, George Sand, Michelet—but they had more character, character that matured in a bracing atmosphere of keen moral realism. That is manifested, to use Sainte-Beuve's sagacious words, in the choice of their subjects, in the nature of their thought, and in the tone of their work. This morally bracing atmosphere Sainte-Beuve missed in his own life and in that of his age. When the religions among which he had groped have failed him, he still seeks props for the feebleness of human nature in the very accidents and vicissitudes of life: "A little constraint, a little poverty is a help; it is under these harsh conditions that man, half willingly, half against his will, extorts from himself, from the inmost and secret chambers of his nature, all the art, all the industry of which he



is capable, and the little gold that he owes to all.”<sup>36</sup> At any cost, he would not have man float and drift; he abhors the idea of a life without meaning or purpose. His scepticism may, and does, conjure up this phantom; his good sense and his moral seriousness dispel it again. “We must have motives in life, motives as insistent as possible. The wise, those at least who are over-wise, if left to themselves, run the risk of mistaking inaction for superiority, and, under pretext of moderation, of listening to the indirect counsel of indolence. As for myself, who am one of those that glory in pursuing a free and undefined career, I have always regretted the impossibility of infusing into it some more precise and determinate motive for action. The ideal is a fine thing, but it is very remote and it has its eclipses; the public is a respectable person, but it is very multiple; it has many faces, and we do not know it. Why can we not picture it more familiarly, in a tangible and encouraging aspect, in the form of a judge near at hand, an intimate friend who sees and knows, who censures and rewards!”<sup>37</sup> Montaigne felt that a man was thrice blessed who encountered in life even the shadow of a friend; Sainte-Beuve seems to have felt that the man was thrice blessed who could find even the shadow of a religion—or the shadow of a moral code.

Reduced to seeking within himself what he could not find without, he still remained constructive as far as taste and reason could carry a nature that was not cast in the heroic mould. In his moral ideas Sainte-Beuve does not belong to the austere company of those who demand the utmost effort of human nature—far from it. Neither does he belong to those who have so low an estimate of it as to demand no effort at all, except such as man’s own self-love allures him into making. He is not a cynic; he did not arrive at that “intimate mockery of all things” which he attributes to the Cardinal de Retz, and which pervades the whole thought of such a questionable modern as Anatole France. He reproaches the last representatives of the old

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<sup>36</sup> CL 13-234.

<sup>37</sup> CL 13-422.

régime for cherishing that "curse of the times, raillery and scoffing." "Such laughter," he says, "rends the heart, and, however witty these people may be, nothing is more like the laughter of madmen, when one reflects on the ruin that was impending."<sup>38</sup> We are a long way here from the mockery of "The Gods Athirst," and the laughing sophist of our age is judged in advance. Sainte-Beuve, who relished so little this weakness in Voltaire, would have indignantly repudiated the alleged discipleship of Anatole France. At the centre of his moral ideas is the respect for "a direct moral sense which energetically says *No* at first sight to evil and injustice."<sup>39</sup> However sceptical, he never refines away the moral sense. And he not only respects but even reveres that "ideal and moral elevation which, though rare, indeed, and often counterfeited, is in some natures so real as to demand a place in a complete picture of humanity."<sup>40</sup>

He belongs to the very reasonable moralists who try to reconcile morality with average human nature, and who consult self-respect and decorum, or shall we say sound taste, in setting up the moral goal toward which they point. Sainte-Beuve belongs in the somewhat varied and elastic group of *honnêtes hommes* which includes such men as Montaigne, Molière, La Rochefoucauld, Hume and Gibbon, and even rises at its best to the level of a Vauvenargues or a John Stuart Mill.

The morality of the *honnête homme* is a philosophic compromise between saintliness and worldliness, an attempt to retain as much of either as the other will suffer. The genuine saint will austere analyse the elements of worldliness that he finds here, will trace them to their roots in the ego, and will set them down as so many sly concessions to the lure of evil. The typical man of the world will cynically analyse the elements of saintliness that he finds here and will set them down as naïve yieldings to the dupery of virtue, to the illusions of self-respect and of self-sacrifice, to some vain dream of a life dissociated from the inevitable

<sup>38</sup> CL 12-505.

<sup>39</sup> CL 3-349.

<sup>40</sup> CL 2-362.

and invincible ego that, visible or disguised, shapes all our actions, and whose omnipresence it is the sum and substance of wisdom to recognize. Sainte-Beuve had a natural love for virtue; he had a need of self-respect, and he was not incapable of self-sacrifice—though far more in the region of impulse than of will. At the same time, being even more an intellectualist than a man of feeling, he was supremely unwilling to be a dupe. His moral concern was therefore a mingled one. He felt the charm of saintliness more poetically than practically (and most of us are poets in this respect), yet he felt it deeply, so deeply that in his poetical mood he played protractedly and delightedly with the vision of practice. But with him any naïveté of feeling is always held in check by his worldly clairvoyance. He is always on the lookout for the precise point at which the saint has been duped and has believed in something *quia absurdum*. His inner demand for self-respect—to which conduct had given the lie—made saintliness a fascinating inquiry, a vaguely promising refuge, an escape from an ego in disgrace with itself. On the other hand, his unwillingness to abandon the substance of worldliness for the shadow of sanctity, and, to be complete, the recurrent triumphs of the flesh over the spirit, tended to cool his moral ardor into mere curiosity. We thus get the spectacle of Sainte-Beuve studying religion for a decade, but studying it *à reculons*, from a constantly remoter focus, passing by degrees from an intense, though mainly poetic, fervor to the most obviously detached and critical scepticism. Yet, although the religious velleity fades out thus completely, the moral curiosity never dwindles into a purely intellectual curiosity. It is the curiosity of the realist, of the lover of truth not as empty theory but as theory verified by practice, as theory offering a rule of conduct and a philosophy of life. Sainte-Beuve, after much striving, and with a lingering reluctance, found, or thought to find, these blessings in an ultimate acceptance of the natural man, but of the natural man disciplined, cultivated, and rationalized, filling his rôle as a bee in the hive and doing his share of the labor for the sake of his share in its



rewards. Only, he had a poetical strain, a strain of ennobling poetry, that carried him a little beyond this conception; and he consented to be just a little the dupe of poetry, even while refusing to be the dupe of sanctity. He gilds this rational morality with an ideal halo. He translates the notion of strict decency in conduct till it borders on chivalry, and that of self-respect till it borders on self-sacrifice. He covers the whole interval, but he covers it in the only way in which so wide an interval can be covered, waveringly, inconsistently, and often only poetically. It could not be otherwise since this morality is not a fixed absolute like saintliness or cynicism, but a perpetually shifting mean, a compromise which in application turns out to be an unending succession of half rational and half irrational compromises.

The morality of the *honnête homme* is as much an expression of character as it is of intellect. There is in him a certain fund of dignity, which, quite as much as his reason, makes itself felt in his beliefs. Men may be judged in great part by what they are willing to believe. If their feelings are finer than their theories, they ennoble these in spite of all contradiction. According as it is carried into the temple or the tavern, the selfsame idea will smell of incense or of wine. A Milton and a Voltaire may hold the same opinion, but the construction they put upon it will undermine its identity. Imagine them reading each other's works! There is no need to develop the picture. Yet the pagan pessimism of "Candide" is ultimately akin to the Christian pessimism of "Paradise Lost," just as the ascetic cult of virtue in "Comus" is ultimately akin to the rational cult of virtue in "Candide." As a moralist Sainte-Beuve covers most of the interval between "Candide" and "Comus"—or let us say "Volupté" and "Port-Royal." He believed many things which Voltaire had accredited. But he assents protestingly and his imaginative mood embellishes the waste places which his analytic intelligence creates. This explains the wide variations in temper between utterances that otherwise seem wholly incompatible. One day he theorizes with La



Rochefoucauld, and the atmosphere is of a Kamchatkan bleakness; another day he views mankind with the eyes of Vauvenargues, and *le rayon* is restored and human nature is seen in the sunshine.\*

In the middle region, which is his native habitat, he is full of insight and strews his pathway at every step with sagacious observations. They are often those of a La Rochefoucauld, a little softened, and tempered by a greater variety of experience, or of a La Bruyère, a little less satirical and more tolerant. After citing some letters of the aged Talleyrand, which surprise one by a charming tenderness of tone, he shrewdly remarks: "We must always distrust the impression made by aged men, especially if they are men of education and breeding. In growing old, when the passions are deadened or dulled, when one has no longer one's faults or one's crimes to commit, one becomes good again, or seems to; one even seems to have always been so: Madame de Sévigné used to speak of that diabolic de Retz as *our good cardinal*."<sup>41</sup> Such an observation is a compendium of worldly wisdom. On a far higher plane, that of profound moral insight, Sainte-Beuve is only an occasional visitant rather than a sojourner—but not without profit. In the heyday of romanticism, when everybody was proclaiming in verse and prose that the secret of salvation lay in a boundless outpouring of sympathy, he was able to escape this giant fallacy of the century and to see, as the great masters of the inner life have all seen, that virtue lives mainly by imposing a constant restraint on the natural expansiveness of human nature. "Virtue, in this nether world, on account of man's habitual recalcitrance, consists almost entirely in abstaining, in sacrificing, in withdrawing oneself and refusing to participate in things, very often in saying an outright *No* to them."<sup>42</sup> That is a monument of philosophic wisdom. He prefers, however, to keep to the middle region where he is most at home, as a disciple,

\* Sainte-Beuve discusses at length this whole subject of the *morale des honnêtes gens*, its nature and its limits, in "Port-Royal," vol. III, cp. XV, pp. 351 ff.

<sup>41</sup> NL 12-91.

<sup>42</sup> PC 2-511.

perhaps the most distinguished disciple, of La Rochefoucauld. No one has ever displayed more acuteness in tracing the play of self-love in human action. His master, who delineated in approximate perfection the whole negative side, and that is by far the greater part, of human nature, furnishes in the few pages of the "Maximes" material for endless reflection; Sainte-Beuve never tires of making the reflections, but he makes them usually in a finer temper, with no less acuteness and with more wholeness. That is because he surveys mankind with a more extensive view, and tempers the ideas that rise from his own experience with those suggested to him by the study of an endless variety of other lives. And also, at bottom, he is perhaps more in earnest and more eager for the exact truth. La Rochefoucauld's curiosity had its point of departure in the salon, though it culminated in a philosophy of human nature. Sainte-Beuve's began as well as ended in disinterested homage to truth. The acuteness of analysis with which he practiced La Rochefoucauld's method and the greater fineness of spirit with which he infused it alike appear in such a characteristic piece of moralizing as the following one, set forth in that easy-paced and familiar manner which allies him so intimately with another of his masters, Montaigne:

"There are recorded a thousand charming and surprising manifestations [of Madame Geoffrin's beneficence], such as Sterne would have delighted in. I will relate one. Some one remarked one day that everything she served was perfect, except her cream. 'It can't be helped,' she said, 'I can't change my dairy-woman.' 'But what has this dairy-woman done to become such a fixture?' 'Why—I have given her two cows.' 'Strange logic,' they cried on all sides. And the truth is that one day when this dairy-woman was broken-hearted over the loss of a cow, Madame Geoffrin had given her two new ones, the second to console her for having cried so hard; and since that day Madame could not think of a change. That is the rare and delicate side of all this. Many people might have been capable of giving one

cow, or even two; but to keep this ungrateful or negligent dairy-woman, in spite of her poor cream, is what few would have done. Madame Geoffrin did this for her own sake, in order not to spoil the memory of a charming act. She wished to do good in her own fashion; that was her distinctive quality. Just as she scolded, not to mend other people's ways but for her own satisfaction, so she made gifts, not to render others happy or grateful but to please herself. Her beneficence had a little touch of the unceremonious and the humorsome; she disliked being thanked. She had a theory as to this, which she carried to the point of paradox, and she even went so far as to eulogize ingratitude. What is abundantly clear is that, even in making gifts, she wished to pay herself back with her own hands, and to enjoy alone the satisfaction of doing good. May I confess it? I fancy that I detect here, even in so excellent a heart, that trace of egotism and of insensitiveness inherent in the eighteenth century. The pupil of Madame de Tencin, the friend of Fontenelle, reappears here even at the moment when she yields to an impulse of her heart; she yields to it, but she does not abandon herself to it, she plans out the whole thing . . . In the admirable chapter of Saint Paul on Charity, we read, among others characters of this divine virtue: '*Charitas non quaerit quae sua sunt . . . Non cogitat malum*—Love seeketh not its own . . . thinketh no evil.'

"Here, on the contrary, this worldly and social beneficence seeks its own pleasure, consults its own taste and its own satisfaction, and is mingled with a little calculation and irony. I know all that can be said in favor of this respectable and charming virtue, even when it thus thinks of itself; Madame Geoffrin, when brought to book, found a thousand clever defenses of characteristic subtlety. 'Those,' she said, 'who rarely oblige, need no rules of conduct, but those who oblige frequently should do so in the manner most agreeable to themselves, *because what is done daily needs to be done easily.*' There is here a smack of Franklin correcting and condensing a little Saint Paul's somewhat too spiritual conception of charity. Let us then respect, let us honor, the



natural and reasoned liberality of Madame Geoffrin; but let us recognize, nevertheless, that there is missing in all that goodness and beneficence a certain celestial flame, just as in the whole spirit and the whole social art of the eighteenth century. There is missing a bloom of imagination and of poetry, a background of light likewise celestial. Never do we see in the distance the blue sky or the radiance of the stars.”<sup>43</sup>

Those are the words of a moralist who has had one foot in the world of La Rochefoucauld and one in the world of Port-Royal, and who brings to the penetrating insight derived from both something of the light graces and of the serious poetry of Plato. Sainte-Beuve is a supreme master in the delicate art of not being duped, and, unlike most masters in this art, he is equally at home in its positive as in its negative exercise—in discovering virtue as well as in unmasking vice, or in disentangling their puzzling overlappings, yet without confounding saint and sinner as the cynic does. How deftly he segregates the little sediment of the baser self, which frequently settles down unheeded and unseen at the bottom of a soul during the very process that purifies all the superior layers to a limpid transparency! Of the saintly theosophist Saint-Martin, who aspired so naïvely to be a spiritual guide to others, he says: “This is a sort of danger to which these humble and gentle souls are exposed when they take upon themselves to act and to walk alone in the paths of holiness and to play the part of apostle and pope in this world: it turns out that there is an enormous Leviathan of pride concealed and dormant in the bottom of their tranquil lake. And let them not assert that what they feel is too fine to be mere pride, it is only pride in its most subtle and specious disguise.”<sup>44</sup> That is unsparing, but it is not uncharitable.

Sainte-Beuve’s moral ideal, an ideal which he did not, it is true, succeed in keeping uniformly in mind, is suggested in a page on Vauvenargues:

“Without false enthusiasm, without resentment, he has

<sup>43</sup> CL 2-320.

<sup>44</sup> CL 10-252.



judged humanity with a just measure. Involuntarily, unless we are on our guard when judging, we let ourselves be influenced by the secret thought of the rank that we ourselves should take; we are inclined to exalt or abase it, according as we feel more or less of virtue in ourselves, more or less of range and power. Vauvenargues could afford to set the average for humanity as high as possible, sure as he was of attaining it himself. Yet he did not set it too high. He recognized the vices and weaknesses of men, but he recognized them with grief, with nothing of that malign joy which seems like a satisfaction and an absolution that we secretly give to ourselves; in the same way he maintained the larger lines, the sound and vigorous portions of nature, without that air of superiority by which we seem in their name to exalt and to applaud ourselves. Placed between the somewhat severe moralists of the seventeenth century and the rashly optimistic thinkers of the eighteenth century, he did not overestimate human nature, nor did he slander it."<sup>45</sup>

Sainte-Beuve is thus chiefly important as a moralist in the French sense of the word, in the intellectual sense. His delicate probings of the springs of action, his subtle analysis of spiritual moods, his sympathetic rendering of the inner life of saints no less than of sinners, are of the rarest degree of fineness and of truthfulness, and, however slightly they may stimulate to action, or tend to fix conviction, they are yet immensely and uniquely edifying. What other work of his century can we put beside his as a "storehouse of documents for the study of human nature?" Neither that of Taine, I fear, nor yet that of Taine's master, Balzac.

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<sup>45</sup> CL 3-142-3.

## VII

### THE HISTORIAN

The habit of looking at men in the gross makes their lives have less of interest for us.

—*Thoreau*

The nineteenth century is the century of history and of science. Its literature will, in the retrospect, seem far less significant, as the romantic impulse and the counter-currents that it provoked come to be seen in perspective. Criticism reflected these new influences much more than did the creative literature of the time. Criticism tended to be historic and even scientific. The new spirit is already apparent in vital form in Madame de Staël. It is developed in more formal though less vital fashion by Villemain. It is very powerfully fortified from without by the more solidly intellectual associates of Villemain at the Sorbonne, Cousin and Guizot. It is further popularized by the brilliant group of literary historians in the first half of the century. It undergoes a final crystallization at the hands of the representatives of science, and of scientific history, and of the various disciplines bearing the scientific stamp that were born or developed in the course of this ultra-cerebral age. Sainte-Beuve was too much a man of his time, and was, both in theory and practice, too much opposed to anything that savored of sterile aloofness, to refuse to lend himself to the contemporary movement of thought. We have seen how he paid homage to science in his Lucretian view of nature, and in the naturalistic intentions and suggestions that crop out here and there in his criticism. As for history, that was a far more congenial and far more completely accepted influence. Who values experience values history. Experience was the keystone in the arch of Sainte-Beuve's thought. He would not go beyond it, neither would he consent indolently to fall short of its teachings and to move in a maze

of vague imaginings. "More light" was his constant aspiration, and behind literature he turned especially to history for illumination. It had attracted him from the start: his earliest articles dealt largely with the historical works of the day. He was fond of quoting the words of Pliny: "*Historia, quoquo modo scripta, delectat.*"

Of the various modes of writing history, which did Sainte-Beuve prefer, and which did he reflect in his own work? There was in his day the picturesque school, which treated the past from the painter's and the poet's point of view, emphasizing its local color, its brilliant trappings, its spectacular and dramatic aspects, humanizing it by all sorts of anecdotic and personal side-lights, and rendering it artistic by wedding imagination and emotion to erudition, in short, by making history a branch of literature. This resuscitation of the dead past was most brilliantly practiced by Michelet, and most sagely by Thierry. With a certain affinity to this school, the recent history of France was treated by such men as Thiers, Louis Blanc, and others. At the same time a more original and profound conception of history prevailed in a school which aimed to make history scientific by detaching it from literature and by attaching it to philosophy. This school was destined to prevail over its rival. It has accomplished the first half of its aim. It flattered itself, in the days of Guizot's magnificent generalizations, that it had also accomplished the second half. History repeats itself. It seemed that a sufficiently large number of repetitions, duly noted, should enable the listener to catch the inarticulately reiterated message. Thus history was to be promoted from an art to a science, and in ceasing to be ornamental was to become useful, was, in short, to become the guide, philosopher, and friend of mankind.

Toward which of these conceptions of history did Sainte-Beuve lean?—for one's dominant temper, the fundamental constitution of one's mind, will make one lean either to the one or to the other. "Take note," says Sainte-Beuve, "that there are no types of mind more opposed than those of the historian, properly speaking, the narrator and chronicler,

and that of the philosopher or the man of doctrine.”<sup>1</sup> His temperamental leaning is shown in such a passage as this one in which he celebrates the fresh charm of Joinville:

“At the other extremity of the historic chain we get a precisely contrary impression, in reading our grave professors of history, our philosophic disciples of Montesquieu, who yet have no spark of his animation, all those who pretend to give the reason of every fact and to fathom every event, who on this shifting stage, admit neither the unforeseen nor the play of petty causes often as influential as great ones; men of intelligence but lacklustre and laborious, bending under the weight of their maturity as much as Joinville roved and gamboled in the overflow of his naïve and childish spirits. The writers that issue from these schools, or from these overwrought and somber races, may well try their hand at writing history even in their twentieth year; there is no age nor hour for them; and no one will ever say of them, of their thought or of their style: ‘The breath of the morning has blown here.’ ”<sup>2</sup>

Sainte-Beuve is very much in sympathy with the historians who enable us to relive the experiences of past times, but with the increased order and lucidity which the clarifying influence both of art and of time imposes. He is intensely interested in the facts thanks to which the picture may be constituted. But he is also moved by a humane interest in the meaning of the spectacle—in so far as it has a meaning. History is experience, and, like all experience, it has a lesson. Curiosity, except in third-rate minds, is always motivated. “I do not know if that be historic truth,” says Sainte-Beuve, after quoting a characteristic page of Saint-Simon, “but it is assuredly grand and eternal moral truth.”<sup>3</sup> His final interest lay in this moral truth, not always and necessarily partaking of grandeur, nor deserving of immortality, but in any case the indispensable *vade mecum* of whoever would move through the world of men and the mazes of human action with open eyes and a wisely compre-

<sup>1</sup> CL 9-98.

<sup>2</sup> CL 8-508.

<sup>3</sup> NL 10-276.



hending heart. How men live and how men should live were questions that interested Sainte-Beuve intensely. If he has so much to say on the one, and relatively so much less to say on the other, it is because he recognized that much knowledge must be gathered in order to distil a little wisdom, and because the lessons of experience are so implicated in experience itself that they are best read in the original text. To have lived with Washington or Nelson would doubtless be a surer initiation into the high heroic than to read Homer. And to see Homer's heroes living a second life in the Iliad is a better lesson in heroism than any ethical disquisition. To the painter Gros, fresh from the reading of Homer, men seemed twenty feet high. For Sainte-Beuve, therefore, *historia scribitur ad narrandum, non ad probandum*.

Sainte-Beuve values history itself more than the historian's commentary. He would have agreed with Mill's dictum that "there is not a fact in history which is not susceptible of as many different explanations as there are possible theories of human affairs." The historian's commentary can, therefore, never be too circumspect. Historic divination is a fine thing, but the slightest imprudence on its part at once fills Sainte-Beuve with incurable suspicion. He writes:

"The question raised by Renan's pretty picture of Saint Francis of Assisi is the same as that raised nowadays in regard to history itself. . . The historian embellishes things in a remote perspective, he seizes the slightest pretext for idealizing them, he admits explanations which are not explanations. But history would be sadly put to it if it were harshly confined to the literal truth. There are whole centuries that would offer nothing but dryness, dullness, and weariness. We have sought in our day to resuscitate the life that must have existed, to conceive some fancied equivalent. Renan excels in this kind of vision. As for myself, this tickles me, but it fails to convince me. I will even say that I prefer the authentic facts in all their unadorned bareness, I prefer to make my own wayside reflections and to

reconstruct the background myself; but I should never dare to offer to the public these private reveries as so many truths. The demand put upon us journalists for interesting articles, for a display of talent every time that we publish a few pages, leads us very far afield, and in the present case there is no great harm done; let us accept this as a portrait of the charming little saint translated and interpreted in prose. It remains pictorial art, it is painting executed with the pen.”<sup>4</sup>

History, setting up as a philosophical science, transposes its interest from the actual spectacle of life to the supposed logic of cause and effect underlying it. History proper becomes raw material for the philosophy of history. History is no longer experience teaching by example; it is the historian who teaches. The almost inevitable result is that he will not only believe that history is governed by laws, but that he will identify with some system of his own, or of his own times, these laws, only fragmentarily apprehensible at best and hence mainly inapplicable. What an infinity of speculative history was shattered by the discovery of the Minoan civilization in ancient Crete. Sainte-Beuve views with absolute scepticism this whole tendency to philosophize history. “Montesquieu,” he says with a touch of irony, “believed there were laws in history; all superior minds are so enamoured of laws that they invent them rather than dispense with them.”<sup>5</sup> Sainte-Beuve is willing to dispense with them because he is more enamoured of truth, fragmentary and disparate though it may prove, than he is of the sleek symmetry of omnipresent law. In opposition to the ingeniously and skillfully constructed and reasoned history of Guizot, he is for “history, positive and veracious, *à la Machiavel* [!], without hypotheses, depending only on investigation into fact and a severe knowledge of men.”

“When I see how awkward are those whom we call scholars in penetrating into the life of to-day, I wonder if what they tell us of the past has any reality. Niebuhr reading at Bonn the speech of Sauzet during the trial of the

<sup>4</sup> *Princesse* 239.

<sup>5</sup> PC 5-237.

Polignac ministry, said to a friend: 'This M. Sauzet is a man of eminent ability.' It is thus that these great historians judge what lies before their very feet! Transpose the blunder, substitute for the individual a *gens Romana*, prolong the deviation of the telescope to Tarquin the Elder, and you will have some grand discovery, altogether new, and all the surer inasmuch as nobody at this late date can contradict it.<sup>6</sup> \*

Even when guarded and limited, history is bound to have a personal coloring. "Man, we must confess, attains reality, the actual groundwork of things, no more in history than elsewhere; he manages to conceive and reproduce things only by means of methods and points of view that he creates for himself. History is therefore an art; man puts himself into it, something of his own mind, something of his personal self, and indeed it is only thus that history is possible."<sup>7</sup> It is evident that for Sainte-Beuve history, in whatever manner it be written, whether or not always delightful, is always to be viewed with scepticism. And the farther we move from the mere fact, the more insistent becomes his sceptical distrust. As late as 1863, he still recommends above all others Sismondi's antiquated "*Histoire des Français*"†—because it resembles Rollin!—because no artificial system masks the events and falsifies one's ideas.<sup>8</sup>

He feels that history is lawless, and that it is, as often as not, a hair's breadth chance that turns the scales. For him, as for Pascal, the destiny of nations hangs on the grain of sand in Cromwell's vitals, and whole dynasties rise and fall because of the shape of Cleopatra's nose. Man's caprice,

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\* We have only to pass from Niebuhr to Mommsen to find an example of the same "awkwardness." "It is related that Mommsen when visiting Pesth said that he had seen during the day three men of the genuine Magyar type, Erdy, Matrak, and Toldy; he was informed, however, that these three Magyars were really named Lutzenbacher, Rothkrebs, and Schaedel." (Seignobos, *Histoire politique de l'Europe contemporaine*, p. 517.)

M. Seignobos himself, in the excellent work just quoted furnishes (p. 642) still another example of this same "awkwardness" which the historian shares with the rest of mankind in reading the signs of the times. Shortly before the great war, he writes: "The progress of the art of war has made war so hateful that no one any longer dares to make it. The chemistry of explosives leads to the consolidation of peace." The optimist still continues to say as much—leaving out of account the chemistry of that most explosive of all compounds, human nature.

<sup>6</sup> CL 11-478.

<sup>7</sup> PC 5-239.

† For a different judgment of Sismondi, cf. PC 4-47.

<sup>8</sup> NL 6-79.



rather than natural law, is responsible for the rabbit in Australia and for the sparrow in America. As in the world of nature, so in the world of man, individual caprice is engaged in eternal warfare with the general movement.\* The mediocrity of one general and the genius of another have often given the lie to natural law, and have made the weaker people prevail over the stronger. Sainte-Beuve believes too much in the action of the individual to grant that history can be reduced to the operation of general laws, ethnologic, economic, or geographic, or to a naturalistic fatalism of any kind. The scientific historian, on the contrary, is too much under the spell of those great forces which everywhere reveal themselves to his scrutiny, to admit very seriously the disturbing power of the individuals who contend one with another in trying to pull the moving mass into their personal sphere of influence. Scientifically viewed, the French Revolution was an inevitable product of the Old Régime, to such a degree that its nature and its course were pre-ordained. Sainte-Beuve is unconvinced:

"The overthrow of the throne on the 10th of August was not an inevitable consequence of the Revolution of 1789; it was not absolutely inevitable that Louis XVI should be so incompetent a king; a greater quantum of capacity or of resolution in him might have altered the course of events from the very beginning. And so, too, Bonaparte on the 13th of Vendémiaire might have been out of the reach of Barras—he might have gone for an outing in the country."<sup>9</sup>

And here Sainte-Beuve reminds us that Cromwell, before 1640, had actually embarked for America and was recalled by a royal order. He argues that the insuperable difficulty we have in grasping the history of the present

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\* The recent historian is not always so very far removed from Sainte-Beuve's point of view. M. Seignobos ends his history of contemporary Europe with the striking words: "The Revolution of 1830 was the work of a group of obscure republicans, helped by the inexperience of Charles X; the Revolution of 1848 was the work of a few democratic and socialistic agitators, aided by the sudden discouragement of Louis Philippe; the war of 1870 was the personal work of Bismarck, prepared by the personal policy of Napoleon III. For these three unforeseen events there is visible no general cause in the intellectual, political, or economic state of the European continent. Three accidents have determined the political evolution of contemporary Europe." That is the verdict of a Frenchman speaking out of the heart of French experience and French disillusionment. But perhaps disillusionment is the moral, as experience is the method, of history.

<sup>9</sup> PC 4-92.



disappears in dealing with the past only through a kind of optical illusion; at a distance we see only the larger grouping of events, which, freed from the parasitic vegetation that was once a part of them, appear artificially simplified because our vision is artificially limited. We no longer see history in the making, with the thousand petty currents and counter-currents that make it, but we attribute to one apparently controlling cause what was in reality the result of a hundred conflicting causes, and of a hundred conflicting chances.

"Nature has among her secrets unforeseeable tricks by which she outwits in very singular fashion the schemes of pretended sages. Philosophy is quite put to shame by them and, like Sganarelle, gets its nose broken in the middle of its argument. But then along comes the philosophy of history and sets all this to rights, after the event—*è sempre bene* !"

"We were speaking of Washington: 'He is a very great man,' I said, 'and the memoirs of General La Fayette show' that but for him the American Revolution might well never have succeeded.' 'Yes,' replied a philosopher, 'he was a necessary man; but when things are ripe, these necessary men always appear.' 'How lucky!' one might have answered, 'but when they do not appear, do we not fall back on the belief that circumstances and ideas were not yet ripe?' "10

And so, after drinking at the fountain of philosophic history in the austere and dogmatic lessons of Guizot, Sainte-Beuve hastens to reread a volume of the memoirs of Cardinal de Retz so as to get back to the truth as revealed in the intrigues of history and the masquerade of human nature.

For Sainte-Beuve the only genuinely philosophic vision of history is that which regards it as an experiment perpetually renewed and questioned, in which the unforeseen lurks behind the seeming resemblances.<sup>11</sup> It would be impossible to be more sceptical, or to believe less in that doc-

<sup>10</sup> PL 2-160.

<sup>11</sup> CL 1-327.

trine of progress which is so dear, so essential almost, to the modern mind. Sainte-Beuve sees barbarism lodged in the very heart of civilization; he is unconvinced that moral progress has any relation to material or even to intellectual progress; he views his own age as a huge interrogation mark, and the event has justified him, for we feel today apparently less able than ever before to guess the future fortunes of the ship in which humanity is afloat, and in which so many fools and knaves, along with a few (often unheeded) wise men, contend with varying success for the possession of the rudder.

It is above all in memoirs that Sainte-Beuve seeks for history. The eternal drama of human nature is what he pursues here as in literature. Behind the movement of the mass he sees the individual mover. The truth of history is not truly apprehensible in the grandiose and monumental outlines of the past seen in panoramic retrospect; it is discoverable rather in the infinity of human ramifications into which, on close inspection, these are found to recede. To the scholar the past seems to become always better known as time increases the store of documentation (and also, Sainte-Beuve suggests, the diversity of interpretation thereof). But as knowledge increases, intimacy diminishes. We know the past more, but we feel it less. The witnesses have been replaced by the judge. The scientific historian is a taxidermist; he mounts the specimen, but he cannot restore its life.

"When with intimate vision we retrace, consecutively and impartially, the very footprints of those contemporary with the history we study, we are seized with terror, we tremble, and we live over again something of their anxieties and their anguish; we see the abyss before us, and we skirt it in their company; we are oppressed, and we are relieved when the hour of deliverance strikes; we share their gratitude."<sup>12</sup> That, the technical historian will object, is a very literary way of treating history! It is, indeed.

So profound is Sainte-Beuve's scepticism of the historian's power truly to read the past that he inclines to take a

<sup>12</sup> CL 13-212.

position which, if absolutely held, would imply a virtual negation of the received methods and pretensions of history. History, as commonly conceived, makes the past a torch that throws light on the present. Sainte-Beuve is inclined to reverse this position: "It is the present, of which we are intelligent witnesses, that lights up the past for us; it is this present life which we live that teaches us to read history aright, this human history which is one perpetual movement."<sup>13</sup> And this little candle, history, which has to throw its beams so far, though it reveal the large masses and the general outline of things, is unable to render them vitally by showing the sinuous flow of life that once animated them. That life recedes as the events themselves recede. To apprehend them imaginatively instead of formally, one must be, like Sainte-Beuve himself, drenched in contemporaneity. Sainte-Beuve is not so convinced as is the modern historian that those who have the misfortune to live among events (and perhaps make them) are doomed by that very fact to apprehend them less intimately than the spectated doctor of today who has sifted and ordered the original documents, and who, in Sainte-Beuve's words "pretends to know everything about every period better than the people of the period themselves." Historical personages and events fade with the passage of time, and the original colors cannot be revived even by the most skilful restorer. Sainte-Beuve thus explains the vicissitudes of the reputation of Henri IV: "While living and reigning, he was estimated at his true worth, and in the whole range of his qualities as a sovereign and a savior, by all patriotic and judicious men. His greatness of soul, his ability, his untiring vigilance, his superiority over those who surrounded him and of whom he made use so sagaciously, all this was felt in a direct and lively manner, in a manner far more efficacious than any reproduction and demonstration such as history can attempt today with all its documents and studies."<sup>14</sup> In the same vein he says again: "One was very favorably situated in 1820, if one had an intelli-

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<sup>13</sup> CL 15-78.<sup>14</sup> CL 2-369.



gent and impartial spirit, for judging the men and the acts of our great Revolution, of which so many witnesses and leaders still survived. One could profit by their recollections and by one's own, one had that indefinable something which nothing else can equal or replace: the fresh and living tradition . . . Nowadays, we have to pierce through a thick veil of prejudices and of theoretic obstructions—an incrustation of illusions."<sup>15</sup> The French Revolution easier to judge in 1820 than in 1920! What would the Aulards and the Seignoboses say to such heresy? But Sainte-Beuve clings to his idea:

"The shadings are confounded and vanish in proportion as we are farther removed . . . There is in every living generation something which perishes with it and which cannot be transmitted. The written word does not render it, and, as soon as we have to do with delicate thoughts, the best is always that which proves fugitive and which has been forgotten before it became fixed. We know that there are Oriental languages in which a whole vocal part remains unwritten; it is thus with every literature. Whatever has been part of a more or less complex social life has a spirit of its own, a nimble genius that vanishes along with the groups of which it was the soul. Those who come after are tempted to hold it of little account, even while setting up as its heirs. When the morrow dawns, we gather the fruit of yesterday, but we do not get the flowers; and, as for the fruit itself, we have not seen it and gathered it on the tree, in its velvety and downy freshness. Once removed to a distance, we speak of things in a large way, which means usually also in a gross way. Even when we fancy that we know them best, we run the risk of falling into confusions which would make those we speak of shrug their shoulders if they returned to this world."<sup>16</sup>

Sainte-Beuve is speaking here of literature; but in literature and in history he sought the same common element, life, which brought him always, in either field, face to face with the individual. Just as literature for him refused to

<sup>15</sup> NL 13-158.

<sup>16</sup> PL 3-308, 309.



be gathered up into convenient large generalizations and into unified periods, but was subject to endless subdivision, changing its larger aspects every decade or every lustrum, and offering, within the limits of these, diverse schools and groups, and in these again utterly diverse talents, so that the only thoroughly apprehensible unit is in the end man and not the age at all, so he disintegrates history, a mighty maze without a plan, into what Burke calls "the dust and powder of individuality," blown about by all the contrarious winds of the passing hour; in short, he resolved history into its biographical constituents. His historic studies are nearly always portraits of men and women in whom the *tempora* and the *mores*, which refuse to live in the cold abstractions of the analyst, are incarnated as speaking and acting realities. Chateaubriand and the *mal de René* incarnate for Sainte-Beuve half the spirit of the post-revolutionary age: "These great moral epidemics which societies suffer and by which they are transformed, so that nothing remains as it was, wear out many generations, and constitute the veritable epochs of history."<sup>17</sup> His massive "Port-Royal" itself is less the history of a movement than the portrait-gallery of the actors who played a part in it.

Those for whom the play's the thing may well feel that this resolution of the great drama and the magnificent spectacle into the mere actors that concoct its spells, is an abasement of what passed for one of the most dignified of man's intellectual disciplines into a sterile inquisition among insignificant minutiae, whose lesson, if they have one, is that what seems greatness is but a pyramidal heaping up of pettiness and egoism. The past, thus viewed, might well appear both repellent and void to one who looks to it for light and for hope. But for Sainte-Beuve reality is in itself luminous, and all specious substitutes for reality are merely false lights that play illusively over the porous and marshy soils in which man has adventured only to fall and perish.

"The lesson that is to be elicited from history must not be a direct and rigid one; it must not be projected at us in

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<sup>17</sup> CL 4-510.

bold formulas, but should exhale quietly and insinuate itself imperceptibly. It should be substantial . . . it is a wholly moral lesson. Do not fear to lay bare the wretchedness and miseries of man in your grand pictures; the elevation you ask for will supervene. The nothingness of man, the petty impotence of his reason even in its most aspiring moments, the inanity of what seemed most wise, and all that is required of labor, of study, of talent, of merit, and of meditation, even for the confection of an error, all this leads us to a mode of thinking more severe, to the thought of a supreme force; but then, instead of speaking in the name of this force that countervails all our efforts, we bow down before it, and history has borne its full fruit."<sup>18</sup>

That may or may not be an acceptable statement of the scope and the mission of history, it is at any rate a serious and a severe one. It is a sceptic and an uncompromising realist who speaks—it is not a curious dilettante.

The "full fruit" that history brings to Sainte-Beuve, its moral, is, like that of literature, a deeper knowledge of human nature, and along with this a more than half discouraged and disillusioned view of man's immemorial and pathetic struggle to impose the stamp of his own rationality and good-will on the vast tide of chaotic circumstance in which he welters. Sainte-Beuve, in discussing the cunning and underhand practices by which Louvois secured to Louis XIV the possession of Strassburg, is reminded of the sentiment of Euripides that, if right is violated for the sovereign good of the state, the act is noble; whereas in all other matters good faith and justice should be observed. "O History!" he exclaims, "art thou nothing more than this in thy best and greatest days—a mingling of ambition, of cunning, of fraud, and of grandeur? . . . Undeniably, there was utility in the act, but where lies its morality? Ten times in this recital one is tempted to interrupt and to cry out: 'If just acts, or acts such as the event justifies and consecrates, are done in this manner, how then are unjust acts done?' That is the eternal problem in which the right of force is con-

<sup>18</sup> CL 1-330.

jured up before our eyes and appears dominant in the world of history as in the order of nature."<sup>19</sup> The moral is that drawn by the inflexible realist, by one who refuses to say with Emerson at one moment that history is a train of felonies and the next moment that the children of the convicts of Botany Bay have as sound moral natures as other men. This indignant protest that refuses to acquiesce in the cynical moral of history is the protest of the *honnête homme* and of the humanist.

This very moderate faith in the order that lurks behind the jumble of historic events, and likewise in the historian's ability to systematize the luminous streaks that furrow the darkness of the past, led Sainte-Beuve very naturally to an ever more suspicious scepticism as to the ability of any but the peculiarly gifted to guide with the necessary firmness and wisdom the chaotic forces of the present.

His attitude toward every government under which he lived ended in disaffection. He loved order more than liberty, and he believed in equality only in so far as nature and experience sanction it, that is, with vastly more of restriction than of enthusiasm. He had carried something of his youthful enthusiasm into his political views early in life; but the experiments in democracy which the century was everywhere attempting inspired him more and more with a salutary distrust of popular absolutism. His humanitarian sympathy and his patriotism conflicted with his political disillusion. His final attitude is one of half reluctant resignation to the nature of things. His secret dream was of an Augustan or a Periclean age, of a fine harmony in society that should reconcile the Revolutionary ideal of the maximum of comfort and opportunity for the multitude with the aristocratic ideal of the supreme development of the favored few who can alone confer greatness on their age and country. Sainte-Beuve is less detached nationally than the cosmopolitan Renan, less profoundly pessimistic than Taine. He inclines more than either of them to cherish the superstition, or the religion, of *la France, la grande nation*,

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<sup>19</sup> NL 7-63, 71.



*la grande civilisatrice, l'organe expérimentateur des nations d'Occident.* He knew, and he rejoiced in knowing, that France was superior to other nations in intellectual culture, in artistic development, in humanitarian standards; but he could not escape the perception that she lagged behind some others in the matter of political education and political character, that she was less adapted than some others to play, without serious danger to herself, the honorable rôle of *organe expérimentateur des nations*. He trusted the French intelligence more than the French character. Time only increased his misgivings. The Revolution of 1848, one of the stupidest performances ever recorded against an intelligent people, completed his disillusion and prepared him in all good faith to accept and even to welcome the despotism of Louis Napoleon. This was a blunder, a rather startling blunder on the part of so intelligent a man as Sainte-Beuve, and one is compelled to attribute it in considerable measure to the strain of timidity in his character, which made so abhorrent to him all revolutions and the disorder which is the inevitable preliminary of any tardy blessings they trail in their wake. "Better one master than a thousand masters!" he exclaims.<sup>20</sup> He felt that liberty can only be real and enduring when it is the ripe fruit of long training in political wisdom, as in England, and not the hasty fruit of revolution, as in France. The French character seemed to him yet unformed, "always running to extremes, all heedlessness and precipitancy."<sup>21</sup> "The French," he says, "are prone to intermittent fits of fatigue and excitement, or, to speak more clearly, to periodical fevers of turbulence. When they have passed through one period, that of chill, they enter on another, that of burning fever . . . When a certain wind begins to blow, the slightest cause or the least pretext suffices to inspire, in the most honest and the most bourgeois among them, unreasonable and disproportionate moods of irritation which make them a prey to party spirit."<sup>22</sup> These restless moods of his countrymen had led

<sup>20</sup> CL 10-187.

<sup>21</sup> CL 4-511.

<sup>22</sup> NL 10-308.



to the most humiliating shipwreck, leaving France afloat on a raft in mid-sea. Sainte-Beuve hailed the second Emperor as a pilot.

"It might be demonstrated by facts and by experience that man is not so essentially reasonable, and that society is not a work so natural and so facile, that everything moves necessarily of its own accord; it might be demonstrated that it is a creation more artificial than certain over-confident publicists imagine, and that what was so difficult to build and consummate is assuredly not so easy to maintain; nor can we assume that it suffices to let all the members of a nation do and say all that they think good and still feel confident that all will go well and turn out well in reality . . . I believe in the existence of men with a genius for government, and I esteem that amid all the varieties of human vocation and talent this is the one that holds the highest rank."<sup>23</sup>

Unhappily, Napoleon III had not inherited his uncle's genius for governing—or even for reconciling men of literary genius to his government. The uncle was able to discuss "Werther" when he met Goethe; he declared that he would have made Corneille a prince; he even made Chateaubriand a minister for an hour or two. Napoleon's nephew so much neglected the greatest literary adherent of his empire that he spoke to him one day of the pleasure with which he read his *Lundis* in the *Moniteur*, when it was already three years since they had been transferred to the *Constitutionnel*!

Sainte-Beuve has been severely taken to task for his Bonapartism, for the flattering hopes he publicly expressed of seeing the new Emperor "daily doing something unforeseen, new, and excellent," for extolling "the virtues seated in all their magnanimity and grace on the imperial throne," for calling Napoleon III "the most august and the most glorious of patriots," the savior of democratic institutions, of liberty and of the prestige of France, the restorer of the Church, the inaugurator of a new age of Trajan. One is re-

<sup>23</sup> NL 1-413.

minded of Voltaire's flattery of Louis XV: *Es-tu content, Trajan?* Sainte-Beuve was too shrewd a judge of men and of events to persist long in asking and expecting such honorable things from so incapable and so vacillating a despot. He continued to flatter after the scales had fallen from his eyes. His unpublished article on the two kinds of Caesars is sufficient proof of his clairvoyance.<sup>24</sup> He accepted favors from the Empire; he became a senator—an honor which he welcomed as a fitting tribute to literature in his person, he tells us credibly enough. He who had given fitful hints of a critical and in some respects condemnatory attitude toward the great Napoleon, contrived to speak of him now in such terms as might not displease, as might even please, the new Napoleon. One may therefore impute something of policy, as well as of politeness, to those utterances. Yet, why make of them a crime? It was the hard condition of the times for one who believed as strongly as did Sainte-Beuve in the need of working with as well as for his age. It is very far from being the heroic attitude—and Sainte-Beuve was, as I have said, timid rather than heroic, yet without reproach if not without fear. It is rather the mad democracy that inspired him with such justifiable fears that merits reproach. There seems to be no adequate ground for supposing that Sainte-Beuve was not, as regards the essence of the matter if not the form, acting, in genuine good faith though with a dash of rather worldly wisdom, as an *honnête homme*.

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<sup>24</sup> NL 13-461.

## VIII

### THE NATURALIST

Corpora nostra, nonne collegae sunt animorum? Hoc enim malim, quam instrumenta, vel domicilia, vel sepulchra.

—*Erasmus*

Sainte-Beuve's greatest contribution to criticism, aside from his constant revelation that taste and good sense are the soul of it, lay in his use of the historic and biographic elements, and in the large place he gave to character painting. His use of physiology, his naturalism, appears to be, in spite of his own and his critics' emphasis on it, very secondary. It seems less an outcome of his own realism, which did at least as much to restrain as to promote it, than an expression of the spirit of the age. It is not in any profound degree an expression of his own spirit, for he adhered to the traditional standards of a polite past which the Revolution had brutally abrogated.

"It is," Sainte-Beuve confesses, "because we are in the presence of a new world and a new public, no longer of a circle of studious lovers of literature, responsive to the finest and most fugitive impressions—it is because of this that the critic must reforge his weapons and must employ more positive methods of research, in order to meet the demands of readers who are more and more positive in their insistence on results in all things."

It was undeniably Sainte-Beuve's own very positive demand for the unadulterated truth that made him find the old rhetorical criticism inadequate. It led him to expand, more than anyone had yet done, the range of criticism by opening so many windows on the past, by multiplying historic sidelights. It was his native talent for seeing life and literature as twin stars, that led him to treat author and book as inseparable. But his naturalism, the moment it assumes a scientific aspect, seems only a half-hearted con-

cession to external influences. If, as he repeatedly acknowledged, the final secret of genius is bound always to elude us, then we can at best hope to see it in outline and no more. The critic can only clarify the outline, he can only supplement the work that embodies the genius, he cannot replace the work. The magic remains with the magician. Physiology, as used by Sainte-Beuve, emits vague conjectures as to the origins of genius, but it never tries to solve the riddle of its nature. When he writes a study of Deschanel's "Essai de Critique naturelle," he justifies only the historic and biographic method, he finds no arguments, hardly even any words, for his ostensible subject, naturalism. As contrasted with such technicians in criticism as the average historian, or psychologist, or naturalist, it is notable how the man of taste predominates here,—*caput supereminet omnes*. We hear the most intimate and personal Sainte-Beuve speak in the fine passage with which he concludes:

"Whither is fled the time when, although oneself an author and a craftsman, one did not read a book with all this preparation and effort; when the impression of the reading peacefully charmed and moved you as in the theatre the play fascinates and holds the spectator comfortably reposing in his seat. . . Epicureanism of taste, forever lost I fear, interdicted henceforth at least to all critics, last religion of those who had no other than this, last honor and last virtue of a Hamilton and a Petronius, how I understand you, how I regret you, even in combating you, even in abjuring you."<sup>1</sup>

One may be a born naturalist, so to speak, one to whom the very idea of nature, her omnipresent power and majesty, appeal irresistibly, so that she is accepted without question and without protest as the great first cause and the final explanation of all things. That is the way in which the extreme scientific thinker is a naturalist. One may also be a naturalist simply because one's logic is refractory to supernatural explanations, because one is, in Sainte-Beuve's words, "one of those simple-minded folk whom the super-

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<sup>1</sup> NL 9-86.



natural always estranges." Sainte-Beuve is a naturalist in this manner. He has nothing of Diderot's intoxication with nature, nothing of Renan's worshipful immersion in the scientific vision of nature. He views her impartially and without enthusiasm—and with the normal human aloofness. His acceptance is little more than non-rejection. His understanding only is involved, not his imagination. That really pays tribute at other shrines, humanizes his whole conception of man, and sets up alongside of his naturalism a humanism, which, though hampered and vexed by it, has no vital connection with it, and tends, almost to the exclusion of it, to form the whole foreground of his thought. As for the background of his thought, that is sceptical. His naturalism is little more than a by-product of his scepticism.

Both the caution which was one of Sainte-Beuve's virtues and the hesitancy which was one of his weaknesses, combined to make him a sceptic. He hesitated always in the presence of doctrine—he might "nibble at the bait, but he refused to enter the trap." The intellectually hesitant, after all their travels, are apt to find themselves in the end where they were in the beginning. Sainte-Beuve began frankly and uncompromisingly with "the most advanced eighteenth century ideas, with Tracy, Daunou, Lamarck, and physiology"—with the ideas of thinkers whose main effort had been to get rid of supernaturalism. I will not say that this was his home—the great *savants* he cites would have felt that he was a dubious adept in their field,—but, if it was not a home, it was at least a sort of camping-ground to which he returned after his spells of temporary vagabondage. But why should he have returned at all, if the bond was of this fragile kind? That was exactly what his contemporaries so frequently asked him; it was what, for a whole decade, he continued to ask himself. It is doubtless because the hesitancy that recoiled from definitely establishing new connections, recoiled also from definitely severing old ones. Sainte-Beuve clung to his earliest past; he always found it lying behind each of the successive forms of thought that endeavored to usurp upon it.

Sainte-Beuve lived in the age which immediately followed the great schism, the eighteenth century divorce from tradition. It was an age which was strenuously endeavoring to piece together into a philosophy its scientific acquisitions in every field of knowledge. He, like the age, inclined to think that the ultimate lay in nature, and not behind nature. But his naturalism remains fluid, not fixed. He has too profound a sense of the mystery in nature to hope really to grasp it. He sees it with an enlarging sense of awe that scoffs at dogmatic formulations and retains an affinity, even in refusing a connection, with the spiritualistic tradition of the past.

Naturalism is his guess, at times even his working hypothesis; it is not his gospel. He may, in the remoter reaches of his thought, land in it; he does not, like Taine, set out from it. He starts from the phenomenon itself, and, in accepting nature, he refuses to impose any system whatever upon it. It is to him a fact, a universe of facts, not a system. He makes his mind a transparency on which he retraces with undeviating exactitude the sinuous outlines of reality. His private explanation of these is naturalistic, but it remains essentially a private explanation. "Why substitute the combinations of the study and the school for the ensemble and the natural movement of things?"<sup>2</sup> he says in opposition to Nisard's rigid classicism. His tendency was the same in the presence of all phenomena. Philosophically, the only tenable conception of the universe seemed to him a gloomy and Lucretian vision of a godless whirl of atoms in which the law of force rules unmodified by any law of grace. But he shunned rather than courted this philosophic mood. He pushed it into the background of his consciousness. It was a skeleton at the feast of life. He held it for truth, but for the most unwelcome of truths. And in the charmed atmosphere that he endeavored to create at the banquet of literature, he is remarkable not for the introduction of this grim guest but for the care he takes to banish it from the scene.

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<sup>2</sup> NL 13-238.

When he approximates the theoretical he rarely goes beyond the merest empirical attempt to reduce his problem to the data of observation and experience. His words are to be interpreted as tentative and suggestive in their scope, even when they take a mildly dogmatic form. "A grandfather hard and close-fisted, a father orderly and honest, a worthless son, such is the history of many families; it is almost a law. Progress, grandeur, decadence follow on each other's heels, and are ordinarily confined within the limits of three generations." Does such generalizing imply the existence—or even the belief in the existence—of a science of human nature? Have we here anything more than the reading of a somewhat gloomy page from the book of experience, with just that little hardening touch of over-emphasis by which truth requires to be set off in order to command the attention of the reader—and sometimes even of the thinker himself? Have we again anything more than scattering observation, casually moulded into theory, in the notion that age throws our vices into bolder relief? "There are often bizarre corners in the temperament of each of us, hiding-places of passion or of vice, which old age reveals and emphasizes; advancing years lay bare our hidden tastes. Some, like Des Yveteaux, seek their ideal in playing the pastoral swain in an eternal grove, others persist to the very last in framing their dream of bliss in a Blue Chamber or a boudoir: one demands a palace, one a sty."<sup>3</sup>

Sainte-Beuve recognized, as all but the most obstinate reactionaries needs must do, that the body influences the spirit. He inclined to think that the physical peculiarities, the sound or depraved health, the temperate or the excessive mode of living of an author are potent in shaping his work, and at times he tried to utilize such considerations in his judgments. That such things profoundly influence men is undeniable, and the critic who could measure as well as affirm the connection would indeed enrich us with invaluable knowledge. We may agree with Sainte-Beuve when he says that if one is to play a great part the body as well as the

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<sup>3</sup> CL 8-231.



spirit must be tributary, and that broken health is the explanation of many things.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, the connection, though existent, remains purely conjectural, and all attempts to trace it have thus far been virtually meaningless. Sainte-Beuve says of the journalist Carrel: "You physicians and moralists and all those who are not inditing funeral orations, remember this: he had had a very serious attack of liver-complaint, and he owed to it a certain irritability."<sup>5</sup> But who can gauge this hepatic irritability in Carrel's work—or fail to suspect that the alleged defect existed before as well as after this deplorable attack? How, if at all, did Byron's lameness affect the quality of "Childe Harold"? How, precisely, does Calvin's wretched health record its decline in successive editions of the "Institutes"—or Hood's in "Sally Simpkin's Lament"? Do Sainte-Beuve's and Renan's works inevitably suggest portly men, and Taine's and Littré's works cadaverous men? Such physiological origins of man's higher activities we all invoke at times—though without any intention of theoretically committing ourselves. Need we take Sainte-Beuve's chance dogmatizings as more significant? Of sudden conversions he says: "These marvellous changes, which we proclaim the effects of grace, doubtless have their origins in our own organization. It is perhaps, at bottom, only the same secret impulsion, which, carried to its extreme, under a shifting of the inner and outer circumstances, suddenly upsets the soul and makes it face right about, abruptly and as if magically, in battle-array, on a plane in appearance wholly different."<sup>6</sup> He speaks in much the same vein of Bossuet: "The human spirit, at bottom, never does anything except what it is obliged to do. Bossuet, for example, was endowed with a powerful and abundant speech, which pours forth spontaneously and issues like the streams from the bosom of Jupiter; he has no need of seeking ideas nor an order of things different from what he sees around him." He is, in Rémusat's words, only the sublime orator of received ideas.

<sup>4</sup> CL 13-402

<sup>5</sup> CL 6-101.

<sup>6</sup> PR 5-27.



On the contrary, one who finds expression difficult, like Hegel, "cudgels his wits, subtilizes and burrows."<sup>7</sup> If we took such capricious utterances more seriously than their author did, we might make him responsible for the notion that the ability to express ideas generates an incapacity for begetting them; and writers could be classified in two groups: the men of ideas without style, and the men of style without ideas.

Sainte-Beuve, in his scientific zeal, now and then gives temporary encouragement to those who fancy that men of letters are classifiable phenomena. He dreams of a time to come when it will be possible, thanks to our accumulated knowledge of detail, to set up classifications and to outline large groups and "families of minds" having common properties. The mysterious dispensations of heredity may also, he hopes, become more apprehensible through study of the ancestry or the immediate kindred of men of genius. Do we, however, find the physiologically significant detail habitually pressed for its meaning by Sainte-Beuve, and do we find these "families of minds" defined and at least tentatively set before us? On the contrary, the physiological detail is usually introduced by him for its picturesque value or its human interest, as a side-thought or an after-thought. It plays no real part.

He tries to find especially in the sisters of great men a sort of finer copy *avant la lettre* of their brothers. It becomes almost a hobby—he goes so far as to say that Pascal's sister, Jacqueline, the Great Frederick's sister, the Margravine, Maurice de Guérin's sister, Eugénie, were the equals or superiors of their brothers! Yet the theory is in a way not unfruitful. "One thus meets with essential lineaments which are often masked through being too condensed or too overlapping in the great man; the background is revealed more bared and simplified; nature has taken upon herself the task of analysis."<sup>8</sup> "The sister of Balzac, Madame de Surville," he adds mischievously, "whose physical resemblance to her brother is so striking, is calculated to in-

<sup>7</sup> NL 2-341.

<sup>8</sup> NL 3-18.

spire in those who, like myself, have the weakness perhaps not to admire the celebrated novelist completely, a more flattering idea which may enlighten, reassure, and reconcile them."

Sainte-Beuve quotes the great naturalists de Candolle and Buffon as sponsors for the theory that distinguished men regularly have mothers endowed with worth and wit. And he adds that such a remark coming from such observant and eminent scientists has the force of a law. That is a little unguarded and concedes too much to science. Yet to question heredity altogether, after the fashion of some recent psychologists, is to flout not only science but the general sense of mankind as well. Life is, it would seem, such an involved affair that Mother Nature has been able to make it a going concern only by having us begin before we are born and continue after we are dead. This enriches life but complicates living. We have to accept the fortuitous legacy of a past so strangely our own yet not our own, by a conscious liquidation of its intertangled assets and liabilities. We are by heredity rich or poor, aristocrats or plebeians, eagles or geese. It is as futile to ignore the fact as it is necessary to fight it. It is as necessary to know that we cannot eradicate temperament as it is to believe that we can correct it—within the limits of its powers, and of that elasticity which is the most mysterious and sometimes the most surprising of them all. Sainte-Beuve felt all this—but he felt above all its mystery. And in its presence he did not dare to dogmatize.

On the whole his "families of minds" may be dismissed as a vague dream or a casual hope, an intellectual caprice having no ascertainable relation to his actual mode of conceiving human nature. Nothing could, at bottom, have been more repugnant to his mental habit. His gift lay precisely in his marvellous ability to see what differentiated and isolated the unclassifiable personal monad. For reversing this process, for generalizing, he had astonishingly little gift—and he prudently abstained from attempting what he could have done with a very ill grace.

His exquisite taste, moreover, was too delicately literary not to resent instinctively the application of the dissector's scalpel to the living organism of genius. "Anatomists and physiologists, I meet you everywhere!"<sup>9</sup> he cries out protestingly, when he finds this clinical spirit confronting him in the work of his contemporaries. "We have really carried too far the naturalistic and physiological principle and the notion of the interrelation of places and people; we have made over the one in the name of the other; we have insisted on the bond that connects them until we have exaggerated and strained it." So says Sainte-Beuve in one of his latest essays. Evidently he is for naturalism and physiology—until they are applied.

When he finds them applied, he resists. Taine's "English Literature" had no sooner appeared than he uncovered the whole presumptuous edifice of pseudo-science that constitutes its central fallacy. When Michelet appeals to the theory of heredity, Sainte-Beuve drily observes that such attempts, however skilful, only make him smile. "The laws of heredity are barely adumbrated; they are by no means clarified; will they ever be? . . . When history is taken seriously, we must leave behind us all these conjectural sciences that are just arising or are still unborn."<sup>10</sup> We may presume that he would also have smiled at the critic who confidently assures us that Sainte-Beuve owed his love of Virgil's poetry to his father but his love of Wordsworth's poetry to his mother. When some German scholar asserts that Villon owed his satiric side to his father and his romantic side to his mother, Sainte-Beuve remarks that these German scholars, by dint of study, no longer find anything doubtful."<sup>11</sup> He himself indulges, it is true, in such ascriptions. We all indulge in them. We all trace some of our virtues to our fathers, and the rest to our mothers. It is a form of filial piety rather than of naturalism. And by the critic fathers and mothers are not taken more seriously: they are generally used as pegs on which he gracefully hangs

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<sup>9</sup> CL 13-363.

<sup>10</sup> NL 2-116.

<sup>11</sup> CL 14-286.



their children's virtues. The city, the province, the country, the race, are in common practice only so many more pegs. To turn attention from the virtues to the pegs they hang on, to thank the rosebush for the rose and the oyster for the pearl—except perfunctorily—might lead us to thank Marcus Aurelius for Commodus and Charles The Wise for Charles The Mad—all of which does not prove that the proverb *Like father, like son* is much oftener false than true. Again, when Michelet makes his famous bisection of the reign of Louis XIV: *Avant la fistule; après la fistule*, Sainte-Beuve exclaims: "No, this great operation is nothing more than an incident."<sup>12</sup> His taste alone suffices to preserve him from unduly indulging in the physical detail. He indignantly protests against Michelet's handling of the Dauphine, Josepha of Saxony, which he finds gratuitously disagreeable: "This poor body, fat, soft, sanguineous collapsed suddenly.' . . . Is it then because a poor woman is a princess that a historian feels himself authorized to speak of her in terms so unseemly and which are moreover wholly unjustified? What has historic genius to gain by such license?"<sup>13</sup> Yet is not this "unseemliness" the very condition of physiologic characterization? When Lamartine lingers overmuch on the mere physical charms of the young Bossuet, on his silky brown hair and his delicately veined temples, Sainte-Beuve irately protests: "Is it proper, is it decent, thus to paint Bossuet as a child, thus to caress with the brush (as one might a Greek dancing-girl or a pretty, aristocratic English child), one who grew up in the shadow of the temple, an adolescent who already bore in him the promise of the great man, simple and all soul and eloquence? What! do you not feel it? There is here a moral dereliction."<sup>14</sup> In the same way he says of Stendhal: "A direct disciple of Tracy and Cabanis, he arrives in many cases at conclusions more physiological than literary."<sup>15</sup>

Sainte Beuve was himself a disciple of Tracy and Cabanis, and he aimed at introducing physiology into literary

<sup>12</sup> NL 2-373.

<sup>13</sup> NL 11-96 (note).

<sup>14</sup> CL 10-196.

<sup>15</sup> NL 3-118.



criticism! Is it not evident that he was sure to restrict it within very literary limits—to eliminate from it any ultra-scientific venom it might hold in solution? In truth, when analyzing genius, natural forces are precisely what he least dwells on. He rarely talks, except with non-committal looseness, of a master-faculty, of foreordained vocation, of hereditary compulsion. He presupposes “liberty or at least an inexhaustible variety of individual combinations.”<sup>16</sup> He is interested in the family and its atmosphere and its influence more than in heredity; in the human relations, the intellectual and the spiritual environment of genius, rather than in race and local habitat; in the literary group a writer is affiliated with, in his literary ancestry rather than in the physiologic fatality of blood and temperament. He does not weave the physiologic detail, as an essential motive, into his pattern. His predecessors had ignored its existence, as if a book were the product of a disembodied spirit. Sainte-Beuve does little more than recognize its existence; it is not at the centre of his method, it is not really one of his tools, even. This dimly burning sidelight hardly does more than help to make the darkness visible. Physiology so faintly suffusing the background may give variety, may reveal in outline a grotesque or a bizarre attitude, it can do little more.

Sainte-Beuve at the end of two long essays on Madame Dacier says: “I have not even asked myself in the whole course of this study the question, the very French question: Was Madame Dacier pretty?” In regard to the Marquise de Créquy, he has answered this very French question only on the last of his sixty pages. He tells us that Lamennais was of diminutive stature, weakly, excitable, nervous, and slender,—and then goes on to discuss Lamennais as any critic of the older school might have done. When he writes on Stendhal, he gives us the indispensable physical description of that oddly constituted man of genius—but the description comes on the last of his forty pages. He writes on Talleyrand, and him he describes only on the very last of

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<sup>16</sup> NL 9-17.

a hundred pages. Boswell, after depicting Johnson's unkempt aspect at their first meeting, adds that all these slovenly particulars were forgotten the moment Johnson began to talk. We forget them even more completely the moment Johnson begins to write. Sainte-Beuve, when in vital contact with genius, possesses, unlike Taine, this art of forgetting the physical detail.

In the same loosely generalizing way as we all do, he talks of racial qualities. Yet no one objected more strenuously than he to Nisard's narrow conception of the *esprit français*. His own racial psychologizing is as insignificant scientifically as it is rare. No one could be more cautious. And it hardly requires Taine's example to make us rejoice in this prudence—a random footnote of Sainte-Beuve's may suffice. Madame de Tracy, of English birth though bred in France, was, as Sainte-Beuve tells us, so fond of her deceased first husband that she kept his coffin in her bedroom even after her second marriage. Sainte-Beuve comments: "A Frenchwoman at heart, she had in her mind and in her character some of those traits, passionately or agreeably bizarre, which distinguish the daughters of Albion."<sup>17</sup> Would then a Briton, seeing Sarah Bernhardt taking a siesta in her coffin or invading a horror-struck hostelry with her pet panther in leash, have concluded that French women are altogether free from bizarre traits? There is undoubtedly such a thing as racial psychology. It may even be very useful in criticism—on the condition that one remain so delicately aware of its action as never to apply it! *Tout a l'humeur gasconne en un auteur gascon*, says Boileau. If that were true, racial psychologizing would be simple. Sainte-Beuve is on safer ground when, after referring to the hundred and forty-three dishes served at a court dinner in Saxony, he says: "It would seem obvious, at first sight, that the capacity of the stomachs of the North far exceeds that of the stomachs of the West and the South. But let us not pronounce hastily: the nuptial feast of Gamacho is copious in all countries."<sup>18</sup> That exhibits the

<sup>17</sup> CL 13-209 (note).

<sup>18</sup> NL 11-87.

proper spirit of caution! This spirit pervades Sainte-Beuve's work; despite his scientific velleities, he neither believes in nor practices scientific criticism. Taine is no disciple of Sainte-Beuve when, to explain the spirit of revolt in Byron, he traces it to the English race and the Northern climate: "This rebellious instinct is inherent in the race; there was a whole cluster of wild passions, born of the climate, which nourished him: a gloomy humor, a violent imagination, indomitable pride, a relish for danger, a craving for strife." For such adventurous pseudo-science Sainte-Beuve was too temperate, and in the presence of the unknowable his intellect sat down in mute repose until again solicited by the emergence of the plausible and the familiar. The undeniable naturalistic background of his philosophy is almost entirely negative in its influence: it keeps him on occasion from exalting the individual and from emphasizing liberty, and it leaves the way open for the naturalistic explanation which is so seldom and so gropingly suggested. Sainte-Beuve has written only monographs with no larger whole in view; he has confined himself to the individual—and there is no science of the individual. He has left future critics to build up a science—if they choose—without his aid. He warns us that Millevoye's *Chute des Feuilles*, translated by a Russian poet, was later translated from Russian into English, and finally cited by a French critic as a proof of the dreamy and melancholy genius of the North.<sup>19</sup> Everybody who rejects the supernatural is a naturalist—but the vital question is the rigor with which this naturalism is interpreted. Sainte-Beuve had always a sane, a temperate, and a dignified conception of human nature. He did not grub in its animal origins to explain its higher manifestations; he did not paint it revolving in a narrow orbit of inexorable prescription; he views it in its finer avatars with an expectant awe and wonder, concerned at its failures, rejoicing at its achievements, its free and soaring flights, and its sublime potencies. That is the attitude of the humanist. Let us cling to it as long as science will allow. Let us refuse

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<sup>19</sup> PL 1-420.

—as yet—to consider man, in Taine's words, as "a superior animal who produces philosophies and poems as silk-worms produce their cocoons or bees their hives," and whose life unrolls through a fixed succession of growth, bloom, and decay. While the nascent science of psychology is still engaged in forging the chains of hereditary fatalism for the human spirit, let us continue in the old belief that it is still possible, as well as necessary, to be born again, and that the spirit can grow stronger even after the body has begun its slow surrender to the battering of time. It was Aristotle who said that the physical prime comes early in life and the intellectual prime late in life. *Laboremus!*

To sum up, few readers would ever suspect Sainte-Beuve of being more a naturalist than are other critics—and a few will even venture to doubt the fact after he has asserted it.



## IX

### THE CRITIC: THE IMPRESSIONIST

Criticism, for me (as for Monsieur Joubert) is the pleasure of knowing minds, not of ruling them.

—*Sainte-Beuve*

Sainte-Beuve, though not reluctant, on provocation, to assert the dignity and the authority of criticism, regarded it nevertheless as an inglorious branch of literature—as in truth it is. It makes no startling sensation, it wins no dazzling victories. A great author is a public character; a critic remains a private and comparatively obscure person. Out of the countless hosts that throng in the footsteps of a celebrated writer he rallies round himself a few laggards from the rear-guard, who have tired of the brisk pace set by more devoted worshippers. They are mostly academic folk, themselves half-way critics. They languidly assent, or sometimes vigorously contradict, but in any case both the critic and the critical-minded form an unimportant and little heeded minority, a self-constituted committee debating in a corner. In the end their verdict prevails—with that very small, very select, and very dulcet-toned body known as posterity, that posterity which is so innumerable that it is at the present moment not vocal enough to recall Sainte-Beuve himself from the state of suspended animation suffered by writers who are allowed to go “out of print.” Sainte-Beuve coveted “the Capitoline triumph and the genuine laurel.” But like so many aspiring poets, when “his predilection and his secret yearning” met with frustration, he turned critic—or rather he recognized that the critic in him had refused to turn poet.

Some critics make judgment the critic's prime virtue, others disinterestedness, still others sympathy. The resultant types of criticism are judicial, explanatory, or admiring. The judicial critic tries to impose his judgment dogma-

tically on the public; the impartial critic of the most modern type tries to explain a book as a characteristic product of circumstance; the sympathetic critic tries to merge his own personality in that of the writer. Each type has its distinctive virtues and weaknesses. The dogmatic critic may, like Johnson, declare *Lycidas* intolerable, though all the world assert the contrary, or, like Ruskin, he may claim to be simply the only person alive who can tell the real worth of any painting or the real character of any painter. The impartial critic may, like Bayle, treat Pradon and Racine with equal respect. The sympathetic critic may, like Gautier, be unwilling, on a dark night, in a cellar, without a candle, to whisper to himself that a single verse of Victor Hugo's is bad. Evidently, the ideal critic, if he existed, would be at once judicial, impartial, and sympathetic—and would combine with these virtues several others scarcely less important. Sainte-Beuve was not strikingly deficient in any of the major or minor virtues of the critic; but he possessed them, as we all possess our virtues, in unequal degree, and, like all natures that develop harmoniously, he achieved a finer balance in his full maturity. In the notably independent critic, character is often superior to intellect, or at least refuses to be subordinate to it, and so deeply impresses itself on the criticism as to give it the coloring of a great personality—as in the case of Johnson, whose very errors command respect. Sainte-Beuve does not set out by making independent judgment the centre of his criticism. It is at first only the remote circumference of a circle which enthusiasm tends to push constantly outward. Talent is accepted and acclaimed. He inclines in his early work to make criticism the serviceable and zealous handmaid of genius. "After the creation of works of genius there still remains a fine and worthy task, that of propagating the feeling and admiration for them. Enthusiasm, the Muse of criticism, resides in this."<sup>1</sup> Even in Sainte-Beuve's later criticism, the weighing of the work seems usually a result at which he arrives incidentally. It is not at any period a

<sup>1</sup> PC 5-342.

vital part of his method. Even when the judge is in evidence, the code by which he judges is not.

Sainte-Beuve says that in writing on a given author he, as it were, pays him a visit, is his guest, and observes all the courtesies and amenities that this relation implies. The author entertains his critic *chez lui*. The resultant criticism is conversable, sympathetic, generously open to impressions—it is the criticism of comprehension. The opposed type of criticism is that of a Boileau or a Johnson. Such a critic receives, instead of visiting, the author. His only *chez lui* is his own hearthstone. He treats the author in more unceremonious fashion, and he expects him to conform to the usages and humors of the household he has entered. This is the criticism of judgment. Such a critic will never say with Sainte-Beuve that to cite one's opinion as that of some other writer often gives it more weight and effect.<sup>2</sup> Sainte-Beuve, though he gravitated slowly but steadily toward this type, never covered more than half the interval of separation. He instinctively felt that a nearer approach would mean the renunciation in some degree of the openness and the warmth he had developed in his earlier practice. His latest ideal, as seen in the last *Lundis*, was a fusion of the two manners.

In general it is obvious that he is more intent on motivating judgment than he is on judging. He inclines to involve his verdict in the preliminaries that lead up to it. One would at times prefer a bolder manner. Sometimes even the preliminaries are scanted, and we are left more or less in the dark. The reader will hardly be satisfied with Sainte-Beuve's treatment of Michelet in the following page:

"There is a man of letters, one of the most celebrated of our day, an eloquent writer and historian, who has, however, very frequently offended my taste, who clashes with my habits, and of whom I have been tempted many a time to express the most decided disapprobation. But I have a very cultivated young friend, who, in a moment of sincere feeling, in speaking of this same historian went so

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<sup>2</sup> PR 3-65 (note).



far as to say: 'If Michelet were to vanish from the scene, I should feel that a fibre had broken in my heart.' It dawned on me straightway that to be thus loved and valued and to excite such responsive thrills in choice spirits, this man with his brilliant defects and his penetrating eloquence must possess some peculiar gift of charm and emotion that escaped me and that has or has had real power. From that moment I began to respect Michelet and to respect in him those who hold him in such tender affection."<sup>3</sup>

Under this over-modest disclaimer we feel that an adverse judgment lives—and thrives. We feel that Sainte-Beuve retains *alta mente repostum* a judgment which decidedly is not that of Paris and which he is therefore reluctant to express. When he does express it by indirection, all this respect has disappeared. Speaking of Joan of Arc, he says: "Some distinguished historians have owed it to her that they have written chapters extremely wire-drawn and a little mad."<sup>4</sup> The verdict is not unjust, and the knowing reader will have recognized Michelet.

Sometimes this deference toward the person of the writer is such as to leave the writer almost untouched. A whole series of articles deals with the amiable but not very inspired poetess Madame Desbordes-Valmore. They apparently aim at saying almost nothing about her poetry and almost everything about her personality, as far as the double restriction of friendship and contemporary *convenances* permits. The portrait is decidedly monochrome, even to the point of being a bit tedious in its prolonged insistence on the plaintive note in her nature and on the tragic background that colored all the verse of this *mater dolorosa* of poetry. The extreme naïveté of this angelic woman, her utter lack of  *finesse* despite so much fineness, her headlong instinctiveness of feeling with no restraint from ripe reflexion or from native good sense, these limitations and these essential blemishes of so sweet a nature are not really presented or even hinted in the picture. The judge is slumbering while the advocate speaks. Sainte-Beuve's remark

<sup>3</sup> NL 9-9.

<sup>4</sup> NL 3-418.



holds true here at least: "Sincere and truthful criticism is practiced perhaps only in conversation: we write only eulogies." Indeed, the influence of venal journalism was such in those unhappy, far-off days, that he at one time complained that the *Revue des Deux Mondes* was the only organ in which criticism was not pure traffic. It was not possible, for example, even in so respectable a journal as the *Débats* to speak one's mind on Victor Hugo. Nisard tells us that a contributor was one evening indulging in a ferocious tirade against "Hernani," when he suddenly received an order from headquarters to write a favorable review of the play. He interrupted his fulminations long enough to indite a panegyric! Sainte-Beuve's criticism suffered a slight enervation in this hot-house atmosphere.

He sets down as the central virtue of the critic the indifference of such a detached and universally curious spirit as Bayle. He sees in it that disinterestedness which Arnold valued so highly. As regards fixed convictions or any kind of intellectual orthodoxy, Sainte-Beuve was more nonchalant, and for that very reason, perhaps, more disinterested than that friend of lost causes and forsaken beliefs, the Hellenizing and Hebraizing Arnold. One regrets a little this lack of militant fibre in Sainte-Beuve—it is even possible on this score to find him ineffective as a humanist.\* What recommended to him this indifference was the Goethean universality which it comports, the attributes of ubiquity and omniscience which it favors. He is pliant to the last degree and lends himself with marvellous readiness to the ideas of every comer. Good sense and good taste, operating in an atmosphere of perfect freedom, are the only limits that he recognizes. His disinterestedness is perfect. Why does it seem so much more so than that of his model, Bayle? Because it is not, like Bayle's, primarily indifferent. It enters the citadel of an alien mind not simply with a flag of truce and for a guarded parley; it comes as a friend, a temporary auxiliar, an *alter ego*. Sainte-Beuve's intelligence works best, not in a cool and neutral atmosphere, but in one

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\* See Irving Babbitt: *The Masters of Modern French Criticism*, pp. 144, 150.

warmed by sympathy. It is noticeable that his random allusions to the great writers are frequently more severe in tone than are the essays he devotes to them. That is because in the former case his judgment alone speaks before his sympathies have time to intervene. In his studies familiarity begets sympathy. It is his rule to approach an author disinterestedly, after waiving any possible prejudices and antipathies, in a good humor and with a festive air. The temple of literature is for him sunlit and smiling; and its altars, decked with flowers, require no human sacrifices. Such a distinctly ill-humored essay as his early arraignment of Jean-Baptiste Rousseau he later repudiates, not for its content but for its tone. Thus a judgment may be right as a purely critical estimate, and yet be not right as a literary estimate because the finer spirit of letters is not sufficiently present. Sainte-Beuve says of Montaigne: "What is true if we press and wring his book, is not true in the same way when we merely open it and read casually." The virtue of detachment from self is, for a brief hour of contact, imaginatively transformed into attachment to the writer. We yield ourselves to his spell and swim with the stream of his thoughts—for a time. Afterwards we may, we must, decide on the genuineness of the spell and on the depth of the stream. Only let the author first speak for himself. The difficulty is that every author, and the public too, would fain see this first phase of criticism so indefinitely prolonged as to preclude the second phase. "In our day. . . we run too much to an unrestricted admiration," writes Sainte-Beuve toward the end of his career; "we no longer judge when once the word *genius* has been pronounced."<sup>5</sup> He is himself too frequently satisfied to be the expositor "setting forth and making known a writer by his best sides, and leaving to the reader the balancing of the whole and the judgment."<sup>6</sup> That is to play the advocate while officially invested with the function of the judge. It carries an inevitable suggestion of timidity. "While a man is in equilibrio," says Johnson, "he throws truth among the multitude and

<sup>5</sup> Corr. 2-94.

<sup>6</sup> CL 5-232.

lets them take it as they please; in patronage he must say what pleases his patron, and it is an equal chance whether that be truth or falsehood." Sainte-Beuve affords an example of this in his early essays on Chateaubriand, written while he was still enrolled among the worshippers of the great magician. He spoke with seeming admiration even of the poorest of his works, the "Vie de Rancé." "The book," says Sainte-Beuve, "was of such manifest feebleness, that the feeling which made me speak well of it was above suspicion."<sup>7</sup> In that case, one can only ask: *Qui est-ce qu'on trompe ici?* And, if no one be deceived, why adorn an unavailing make-believe with the specious semblance of candor? The true critic has a private judgment of his own. The reader who does not simply ask to have his own opinions flattered by an echo, is curious of this private judgment; and, since judgment is so largely a personal matter, he is doubly impressed when this is reenforced by the personal authority of the critic. Sainte-Beuve is not one of the autocratic and imperial spirits. He does not constitute himself an educator of the public and throw truth among the multitude to take as they please. He does not pay so exclusive a homage to truth. He felt the need of having the public on his side. Not that he aimed at a cheap popularity—far from it—but he shrank from isolation. And the independent critic is apt to be somewhat isolated and to measure his influence largely by the hostility that he provokes. Sainte-Beuve is still paying the penalty, even at this late day, for the occasional judgments in which he came nearest to contradicting outright the popular verdict on some of his great contemporaries. The slight influence exercised on the course of criticism by such men as Johnson or Scherer, the troubled career of such men as Brunetière, or the comparative neglect suffered by certain contemporary critics whose visible influence is so strangely disproportionate to their intellectual eminence,—such things suggest the advantage, Sainte-Beuve would have said the necessity, of conciliating the public that one wishes to act on.

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<sup>7</sup> PC 1-80.



"The critic, alone, does nothing and can do nothing. Sound criticism, even, has its action only in concert with the public and almost in collaboration with it. I will venture the assertion that the critic is only the secretary of the public, but a secretary who does not wait to take dictation, and who divines, who decides, who expresses every morning what everybody is thinking. And even when the critic has expressed this thought which everyone has or desires to have, a great portion of the allusions, judgments, and inferences, a very vital portion, still remains in the mind of his readers."<sup>8</sup> "A critic is a man whose watch is five minutes ahead of other people's watches." That would seem to reduce the critic to the rôle of expressing only the spirit of the times and not the eternal verities which the times are so ready always to forget. Sainte-Beuve does not flatter himself on being able to make the public, even with due precautions, willingly listen to the whole truth, or even to more than a very attenuated fraction of the truth. He complains that the critic cannot paint life-sized portraits. "A bust is already too much in many cases. Two or three features, and these softened, are all that conventions will sanction."<sup>9</sup> He conceives the critic as a sort of journalist interviewing successive authors in their books, traveling incessantly about the intellectual world, a kind of gypsy or Wandering Jew, "seeing enough of everything to chatter pertinently in an appropriate tone." "And let it not be said that if criticism had a central point of view, if it judged by virtue of an absolute principle or an absolute truth, it would spare itself in great part the fatigue of this movement, of this enforced wandering, so that, seated on a high hill like a king in the old epics, or enthroned like the judge Minos, it might at its ease count its subjects and deliver its oracles with unimpaired unity. There is not, as far as I know, in these days, any point of view central enough to enable one, while resting in it, to embrace the infinite variety that is unrolled in the plain."<sup>10</sup> This means that, in a chaotic and

<sup>8</sup> CL 1-373.

<sup>9</sup> CL 1-389.

<sup>10</sup> PC 2-512.



distracted age like the nineteenth century, criticism cannot but reflect the chaos and the distraction. Yet, since it is only by comparison with more felicitously endowed ages that the critic reads the disorder of his own, may he not carry from them into the world he lives in, along with the knowledge that diagnoses its malady, the even more precious knowledge of the remedy that may heal it; may he not be what Arnold lauded Goethe for being, the physician of an iron age? That requires, above all, the virtue of independence, the courage that prompts to utter unpopular truths by contradicting the prevailing taste instead of collaborating with it. Sainte-Beuve was too great a critic not to do this in a considerable measure, but he did it in general with more of prudential calculation than of the heroic gesture. He did not love a fight, even in the most righteous cause.

Yet, although the judicial aspect is not the most prominent in Sainte-Beuve's criticism, he does not by any means refuse to see in judgment the ultimate goal of the critic's activity. Occasionally useful as an advocate of genius in need of support and defense, the critic in his proper rôle is an independent and outspoken witness, a judge.<sup>11</sup> It is after 1840, after a dozen years of special pleading and of mainly impressionistic portraiture, that Sainte-Beuve begins to speak in this manner; and it is of course only by degrees that this new tone in his criticism becomes a firmly personal one. Even in this second and final phase the chief virtue of his work continues to reside as before rather in the delicate and many-sided impressionism of the intelligent man of taste preluding judgment than in the decisiveness of the judge formulating it. He has enlarged his method; he has not renounced his nature.

It is particularly in the last decade of his career that Sainte-Beuve, in the "Nouveaux Lundis," asserts his critical independence. Maturity always brings a certain confidence even to the most shy spirits, provided they have not nestled in a too velvety seclusion from the world. Of this confidence

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<sup>11</sup> PC 5-265.

Sainte-Beuve had now at last his due share, though it usually remains so exquisitely controlled as to be read mainly between the lines. When it becomes more unmistakably articulate, it is apt to forfeit grace and to be suggestive of the propulsion of temper lurking behind it. As Doudan says: "In the 'Causeries' he is still a civilized cat stretching out a silken paw . . . In the 'Nouveaux Lundis' he has disburdened his mind unsparingly." Sainte-Beuve was now established in life, and he was recognized as a power in the world of letters, classed no longer as a literary Bohemian, a mere reviewer and critic like any other of the craft, an adherent of this school and an opponent of that, in Heine's words, a herald running before the literary king of the hour and shouting: Make way for the buffalo, for the great buffalo! He had learned that the herald shares the blows along with the king, but not the glory; and when the leader hailed him also as a poet, it was easy to guess that he was only throwing the royal purple over his vassal in order to divert the brunt of the blows. The feeling that all this was a thing of the past and that he was now independent socially and intellectually made him realize that he "had played the advocate long enough and that it was time now to play the judge." It made his tone firmer and at times more peremptory—at times, too, more harsh. His temper, as well as his intellect, was emancipated. His irritability under personal provocation, his susceptibility under mere provocation to his literary sense, are freely manifested. Let Sporus tremble! *Il y a longtemps, grâce à Dieu, que je ne suis d'aucun couvent*, he cries. Alceste could not condemn bad verses more irascibly than he does. "Ah! Monsieur Jullien, I have seen some of your French verses, for you have perpetrated such, and, good God! what verses! of such a common, such a prosaic quality, with an admixture of the superannuated and the vulgar! verses worthy of a half-grown schoolboy!"<sup>12</sup> If the poet in question seems a schoolboy penning execrable verses, does not his critic remind us a little of a schoolmaster waving the ferule? And it may be added that

<sup>12</sup> NL 7-34.

this discordant note, from one who above all loved the word urbanity (and the thing too), intrudes in a discussion of the humanizing value of Greek studies! Such an outburst seems Johnsonian. Yet though it has the violence of Johnson, it is not violence of the same sublimely self-possessed quality. It is not so truly judicial. Johnson's violence is orotund, Sainte-Beuve's is a bit shrill; it attests weight of personality less than irritation of nerves. Johnson's was a bold nature and could only speak boldly. The strain of timidity in Sainte-Beuve has long given a suggestion of the surreptitious and the circuitous to his carefully guarded and measured strictures on contemporary idols. When the trammels were completely removed, Sainte-Beuve, just a little at sea in these new conditions, did not always observe the most chivalrous usages in his affrays with opponents, or even with friends, when friendship had cooled. His famous article *Les Regrets*<sup>13</sup> is the most signal example of this. His frankness has sometimes a touch of license, and his independence a suggestion of wanton disregard for the legitimate susceptibilities of others. The aloofness of his political attitude just after the days of Louis Philippe also suggests the reflection that the ultimate independence of the critic was perhaps more due to the clearing of the atmosphere around him than to an accession of inner strength.

Still, though his criticism, as a whole, lacks the decisive judicial stamp, it must not be overlooked that it has far more of the judicial element than at first sight appears. Taste is in itself a form of judgment. There have been critics so bent on pronouncing judgment that their prejudices have spoken before their judgment had time to mature. Boswell says of Johnson: "The beadle within him was often so eager to apply the lash, that the judge had not time to consider the case with sufficient deliberation." Sainte-Beuve's faculties sit in plenary council before he pronounces. Sometimes the ultimate verdict suggests itself so plainly that he foregoes its formulation. Sometimes it is so doubtful that he suspends judgment. Sometimes

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<sup>13</sup> CL 6-397.



he brings in a divided verdict, neutralized by extenuating circumstances and ramifying into all sorts of subsidiary considerations of varying weight, so that we get judgments within judgments, or partial, provisional, and even opposing judgments. Sainte-Beuve's sense for the infinite variety that is possible in an art that is constantly renewing itself, and that can only be renewed by constant innovation, would have led him very heartily to assent to Kipling's startling dictum:

There are nine-and-sixty ways of constructing tribal lays,

though he would have demurred at Kipling's audacious conclusion:

And-every-single-one-of-them-is-right.

Innovation is sometimes the product of genius inspired; it is always the product of genius experimenting. Only the critical sense can decide which experiments are successful, which are worth repeating, and which were worth making. Hence the immemorial feud between the creator and the critic. To weigh these experiments, to accommodate the old standards of measurement to the strange proportions of these new inventions, to be at once hospitable and judicial in the presence of the innovator, is the most difficult task of the critic. Most critics incline to follow the drastic method of Malherbe,—to condemn every novelty on the safe ground that one will thus be in the right nearly all the time. Sainte-Beuve observes that the old critic is regularly hostile to the new writer. "This misunderstanding nearly always arises when a man of genius appears in literature. He always finds on his path at the beginning of his career some men both intelligent and sensible, but of an inhospitable and negative spirit, who estimate him by his faults, who try to measure themselves against him with all sorts of reasons of which some may be very sound and even solid. And yet they are beaten, they are thrust aside and overturned: and why? because they have encountered a *Genius*. They did not suspect this, and that is why they were beaten.



The foremost superiority of a critic is to recognize the advent of a power, the dawning of a Genius."<sup>14</sup>

Sainte-Beuve therefore did his utmost to keep in touch with the new generation. He always maintained an admirable balance between the temporary fashions in literature that carried away the public and the reactionary aloofness of the *laudator temporis acti* who refuses to pay tribute even to genius unless it wear the time-honored uniform. When a thing which seems contrary to the principles of art has nevertheless been attempted in practice by many artists, artists not of one group and one place and moment only, we must revise our rules on the ground that, despite its evident drawbacks, this unclassified and novel apparition corresponds to some deep and perhaps growing need of the spirit which art cannot but aspire to express, even though it crack its moulds. There is here a healthy growth, not mere rebellious violence. But how circumspect, how doubly and trebly guarded, must the critic be who comes out of his stronghold to make common cause with this alien invader! Criticism, however open and receptive, is bound to move but slowly behind the triumphant audacity of genius—even at the risk of seeming in the end, despite its goodwill, to be dragged as a vanquished enemy at its chariot-wheels. To quote Sainte-Beuve himself:

"I think I understand as well as others do the appeal of stability in literature, and I will not contest it. It is pleasant indeed to say to oneself without more ado: all that is great has been done; all the fine verses are written; all the sublime speeches are made; there remains nothing for us tardy comers on the morrow but to read, and reread, and admire, to turn the morsels over and over on our tongues, to remain calm and collected in the society of the models, to show our own superiority by proclaiming them superior to all that has since been attempted and to all that shall be attempted hereafter . . . But, after following this régime for many years, whither are we led? What do we arrive at? One retains a certain distinction, no doubt; but it is unpro-

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<sup>14</sup> Chat. 1-267.

gressive, narrow, confined, and wholly alien to the genuine and ever renewed intellectual activity of the age. We have ended by deifying our indolence under the name of taste. These ancients, these forerunners whom we extol, were classics in action, erect and militant; we remain classics seated, eternally seated."<sup>15</sup>

The critic, he holds, is also a practitioner, and should take up art where he finds it and contribute in every way he can to elevate and fortify it. He should take his cue from the warm and hospitable spirit of Diderot, instead of year by year with slow hand moving a leaden sceptre from head to head.<sup>16</sup> "He should be one of the first to feel the fresh wind rising, to hail fecund innovations . . . He should not so adore the ancient as to reject what is modern—he should admit this in all its varieties, if they are grounded on reason; he should keep in continual contact with what is living, rising, stirring and renewing itself, in the presence of the august but somewhat cold images; and, without relaxing the noble style or lowering the columns of the temple, he should be quick to recognize, to enjoy, and if need be, to point out to the public what is in the vestibule or on the stairway."<sup>17</sup>

At the same time, Sainte-Beuve is not at all inclined to let the reins hang in utter looseness on the neck of Pegasus. Even in the wildest flights and in the most unexplored regions, he demands that the sense of direction be retained. Inspiration cannot abrogate reason, and genius cannot be a law unto itself:

"Tradition tells us, and the sense of our own civilized nature tells us even more loudly, that reason must always preside even among the elect favorites of imagination; or if it does not preside constantly, and if on occasion it lets genius have its way, reason is never far off, it stands near by smilingly awaiting the coming moment and the signal for return. This is the literary religion to which I adhere

<sup>15</sup> NL 3-72.

<sup>16</sup> NL 3-99.

<sup>17</sup> NL 2-246.

even in the presence of the liveliest audacities of genius, and to this I mean always to adhere.”<sup>18</sup>

This elasticity and fluidity, this recognition of the infinite complexity and otherwiseness of things, are the marks of a criticism whose final criterion is taste. The dogmatic critic, rightly or wrongly, has rules or standards of some sort which he regards as fixed. He feels himself the depositary of sovereign authority, and sets up in the republic of letters an equivalent of the divine right. The critic who finds his sanction in taste is more tentative and experimental. Judgment is not his starting-point but his goal, and at times it seems almost an inaccessible goal. He finds taste, by its very nature, objectless, a faculty satisfying itself alone and refusing to minister to any other end. To those who would make it a docile handmaiden of more imperial faculties that have a distinct purpose and a visible goal, Sainte-Beuve points out the irrefragable contradictions offered by the facts:

“It is always best to banish illusions even in our most delicate and valued beliefs. Taste, without doubt, clings by many a root to the very soul of us; Vauvenargues has said: ‘Taste is an aptitude for judging matters of sentiment; we must therefore have soul in order to have taste.’ But Vauvenargues, as we know, grants much to human nature, and in his own generosity grants it a little too much. It would be a sorry thing if his dictum on taste were altogether false, but we must recognize that it is not wholly true. In spite of what we should like to believe, we must resign ourselves to saying: Taste is a gift like all gifts, like those of art in particular; it is an isolated sense, which exercise cultivates and which practice sharpens. It never appears more noble, more complete, more truly delicate and elevated, than when lodged in a devoutly moral nature; but it often appears highly developed in very different natures. A certain agreeable corruption (is it permissible to avow this?) is not at variance with it, and even lends an extreme refinement to several rare parts of it. To quote

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<sup>18</sup> CL 15-368.



some time-honored names of a type known to everybody, who indeed ever had more taste than M. de Talleyrand or Julius Caesar?<sup>19</sup> And Sainte-Beuve goes on very cunningly to trace the secret leanings of taste to a certain moral hypocrisy—even in the very greatest of artists: "If we are not at every moment on our guard, whatever may be the fine things we say, and perhaps because of their very fineness, there is an imminent moral deviation, a temptation that readily inclines us to care far less about thinking and practicing them than about saying them, about inscribing and enshrining our names upon them to shine eternally like that of Phidias on the shield of Minerva."<sup>20</sup>

In spite of certain concessions, it is evident enough that taste is for Sainte-Beuve, in his more literary mood, a kind of finality whose relations to the other human faculties are those of accidental tangency; if these relations are drawn closer, if taste is not assimilated, as art itself has been, to the purposeless play of a child, it ceases to operate in freedom and so renounces its own nature to become the thrall of some more dominant power. The essential virtue of disinterestedness, preached by Arnold, which is the very condition of an elastic taste operating in freedom, is apt to seem identical with pure indifference, with lack of convictions. Sainte-Beuve, in theory, tended to this heresy. "This indifference as to the substance, it must be acknowledged, this tolerance, ready, pliant, and whetted by pleasure, is one of the essential virtues of the critical genius, whose peculiar quality, when it is complete, is to run at the first signal into every newly opened territory, to find itself at ease there, to move there as a master and to take cognizance of all things."<sup>21</sup> And here Sainte-Beuve points out that this attitude involves a fundamental hostility toward strict religion and strict morals. "As for religion, to begin with, it must needs be admitted that it is difficult, not to say impossible, to be religious with fervor and zeal while cultivating in oneself this critical and discursive faculty, so relaxed

<sup>19</sup> PR 2-89.

<sup>20</sup> PR 2-90.

<sup>21</sup> PL 1-369.



and so accommodating. The critic's trade is like a perpetual journey with all sorts of persons and in all sorts of countries, made from sheer curiosity. And, as we all know,

Rarement à courir le monde  
On devient plus homme de bien."<sup>22</sup>

It is Sainte-Beuve the sceptic who speaks here—and the theoretical Sainte-Beuve is usually identical with the sceptic. But, in practice, Sainte-Beuve had a religion, the religion of letters, to whose rites he brought both fervor and zeal. Bayle is indifferently interested in the latest book; Sainte-Beuve, though swayed by journalistic exigencies, is keenly interested in the greatest book. He speaks with exemplary fervor and zeal of Bossuet, of Pascal, with judicial discrimination of Voltaire, with repugnance of Piron. As a man of taste—which Bayle, in his supreme indifference, could not be—Sainte-Beuve has decided preferences and rejections. He chooses—therefore he judges.

Yet is not taste, one may ask, only the expression of individual temperament, varying endlessly from age to age, from nation to nation, and even from man to man? Can we authoritatively reprobate any taste? What lies behind our literary preferences but pure relativity? How can we see in taste anything more fixed than the eternal undulations of individual caprice?

Sainte-Beuve has been called a great doctor of relativity—and the sceptical trend of his mind, the Protean mutability of his temper, and the elasticity of his theoretic utterances, all lend countenance to this notion. Yet his work as a whole by no means gives this impression. In his actual practice he opposes a more constant mood to his elastic ones. Taste is for him intimately connected with culture—"it is at bottom a blossoming of the very flower of the human spirit,"—it is the essence of tradition, and tradition is the embodied reason of the race itself. One may thus appeal in matters of taste, as in matters of government, from the judgment of the one to the judgment of the many. "I believe always in

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<sup>22</sup> PI, 1-377.

the permanence of a certain delicacy," says Sainte-Beuve. "The people at large," says Aristotle, "however contemptible they may appear when taken individually, are yet, when collectively considered, perhaps not unworthy of sovereignty . . . The people at large are allowed to be the best judges of music and poetry." This represents a degree of optimism that (outside of the favored land which suffered both Aeschylus and Euripides to die as discontented wanderers self-exiled) is hardly maintainable. "Everybody judges, and nobody knows how to judge," cries Boileau. Such an utterance is more to the purpose. It was so even in the golden age of Louis XIV. And it was so in the age of Johnson, who even suggests the one remedy:

*Boswell.* Then the vulgar, sir, can never know they are right, but must submit themselves to the learned?

*Johnson.* To be sure, sir. The vulgar are the children of the state, and must be taught like children.

*Boswell.* Then sir, a poor Turk must be a Mahometan just as a poor Englishman must be a Christian?

*Johnson.* Why, yes, sir; what then? This now is such stuff as I used to talk to my mother when I first began to think myself a clever fellow; and she ought to have whipped me for it."

Sainte-Beuve is by no means so convinced of the efficacy even of the one judgment possible, that of posterity, as never to express the fear that it may pass unheeded, or go wrong. The tardy justice rendered to so many fine works and the sustained repute of so many questionable ones may well suggest that in some cases justice is never achieved. May not a good book lose itself forever in the sands of time? Before reaching posterity, a good book must run the gauntlet of contemporaneity. Does it always survive? Does it always get at least that modicum of reputation in its own day necessary to keep it away from the kitchen-stove or the ragman's basket? Can we be so sure that the future will continue to respect the past enough to do it justice? With the popularization of literature and the endless multiplication of printed matter, will the dwindling minority retain the influence and the skill, or find the calm, or put forth the

strenuous effort, necessary to winnow the ever rarer grains of wisdom from the cloud of chaff that is suffocating us? It is permissible to doubt. And how many reputations seem to be in inverse proportion to the real popularity of the writer, how many voices seem to live only as receding echoes! Bayle was once so popular that students stood in line by the hour to secure access to his work. Nowadays there are doubtless whole weeks at a time, perhaps months, in which no mortal turns a page of the great *Dictionnaire*,—which the Empress Catherine of Russia once spent two years in reading through.

"The reputation of artists and poets," says Sainte-Beuve, "depends in great part on a dozen luminaries, some of them quite stupid and several of them veritable knaves, who occupy the posts, the positions of authority, in criticism, and who hold the public in leading-strings."<sup>23</sup> Yet it is these dozen men who form the connecting link with posterity. *Vitai lampada tradunt*. This discouraged mood Sainte-Beuve has eloquently expressed in a page contrasting with the splendid literary fortune of Chateaubriand the solitary life and the unheeded death of that paler but more philosophical representative of romantic ennui, Senancour: "A single friend accompanied his mortal spoils to the grave. No journal intoned a funeral hymn, and I do not know if even one announced his death. Those whose opinions are governed neither by renown nor by fortune, and who, after having followed the crowd, are able also to separate from it, will tacitly contrast this silent end and this obscure burial with the high-sounding pomp of Chateaubriand's obsequies on the rock of Saint-Malo; and they will ask themselves if justice means no more than this. But they will feel no astonishment, for, after all, in order to be regretted by one's fellows, it is not enough to have loved them or to have wished to enlighten them, it is necessary to have dazzled, amused, and absorbed them for a long time, to have insulted them sometimes, or to have fustigated or flattered them, and nearly always to have led them astray in many a bypath."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Corr. 1-260.

<sup>24</sup> Chat. 1-358.



Tradition, that common culture of the race vested in its finest spirits, seems to Sainte-Beuve in his own day perilously on the wane, like a sea that is slowly withdrawing from a shore that formerly it washed with a full tide.

This represents the farthest fluctuation of his mood and the lowest ebb of his faith. It is an experience common to every thoughtful observer. But hope refuses to die in any active spirit, because the activity of the spirit is dependent on faith not only in itself but in the world it works for. The more normal and more everyday mood of Sainte-Beuve is not pessimistic. One does not write fifty volumes of criticism without a tolerably grounded confidence that one is intelligently listened to. Sainte-Beuve's religion of letters was not mere dilettanteism elegantly playing with its toys. It was based on a belief that culture has its continuity and that its treasures are not to be lost. He even refuses to condemn, much as he may censure, his own age: "The public, as we know it to-day, is not so hard to please: offer it something that has a little truth, that is a little touching, honest, natural, or profound, whether in verse or prose, and you will see how it will applaud." That represents the high-tide of hopefulness, almost the holiday mood of the critic. Let us strike an average, as he himself usually did, and we shall have the right measure of the faith in which he lived and worked, that faith which he reproached the mercenary Fréron for lacking, the inner call of the critic "to tell a truth that possesses and influences him, and to satisfy a passion for good sense and truth." That passion can only flourish in a cultivated and highly intelligent society.

The floating element in taste is thus neutralized by the fixed element in culture. Culture alone can distinguish first-rate work from second-rate work. Without it we can distinguish only between first-rate and third-rate work—mainly by our instinctive preference for the latter. Boileau, like Johnson, found the unity of critical judgment in the verdict of posterity, in the verdict of the select few ratified by successive ages. This constitutes good taste. There is here an evident appeal to experience. In taste, as in morals,



that is accepted as right which experience, tested on a large scale, has sanctioned. It is so in matters of intellect likewise. Even science is only experience systematized. To repudiate this traditional experience and the verdict that it renders is to fall into the chaos of absolute individualism and to deny rightness altogether. It is to renounce the guidance of Aristotle and to dwell with Shaw and Wells. The vital function of the teacher of literature, according to Sainte-Beuve, is to maintain tradition, not to indulge individual caprice. To the critic he allows larger liberty, provided he be competent, well informed and, above all, so deeply imbued with tradition as to be insured against any great individual aberration. He must cultivate letters with the zeal of a genuine religion. He must, in estimating the book of to-day, look up to the great and illustrious spirits that stand enthroned in the past as on an Olympian height, and he must ask himself how they would judge in his place. He must be familiar, not as a mere scholar, but in an intimate and appropriating manner, with the small and select body of the ancients, who constitute the basis of French criticism, and from whom, as from professors of rhetoric, the great French writers have learned the laws of style, as shown by the quotations and the reminiscences of Horace and Virgil and Homer that adorn the memory and constitute the thesaurus of a man of taste faithful to the French spirit. This, and nothing less than this, will supply him with the necessary terms of comparison, with the wide range of vision needed for true perspective. Sainte-Beuve assures us that Frederick the Great, had he been duly familiar with what is supreme in literature, could never have esteemed Voltaire as highly as he did. In this way Sainte-Beuve seeks to build up a consensus of opinion, based on a curriculum of common experience, which shall guide and supplement individual impressions. It is in order that this background may be as complete as possible, and as little as possible colored by the influences of the moment, that he has in his criticism so prodigiously emphasized the his-

toric element, that golden key to the past, and to the present as well. He says:

"So much preparation is required, that I often feel that in the midst of this feverish and busy life, so full of labor and study, in which each of us has enough to do to follow up his own vein and to bring to a head his own undertakings, even those who are devoted to the same pursuits and who labor side by side may not always have enough time, space, liberty, and elasticity of impressions to be just toward their predecessors. The new generations rapidly succeed the old, and there are exquisite things which are less understood, which are no longer understood in the same manner, after an interval of years . . .

"I deny, I deny absolutely, that one can properly understand and therefore properly enjoy the great works of the past, Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, without protracted study in which method has a large share. . . .

"I maintain therefore that there are certain rules for laying siege to a writer, or to any celebrated personality. . . . Taste alone does not suffice without methods well grounded and precise."<sup>25</sup>

We are a long way here from the pure relativist like Anatole France, who denies all objective criticism, who proclaims his utter inability to escape out of the prison-house of his own personality, who can only narrate the adventures of his soul in the presence of the masterpieces, and who would have the critic say: "Gentlemen, I am going to speak to you of myself apropos of Shakespeare, or of Racine, or of Pascal, or of Goethe. It is a fine opening."

Sainte-Beuve, in so far as he may be called an impressionist, is of a very different order. He does not thus impose himself and his own subjective tendencies on what he treats. His literary sensitiveness is of a far more sinuous kind, winding itself like a clinging garment around its subject, reproducing its every contour, curve, and angle with lifelike fidelity, while bringing out each separate detail of expression with magnified clearness in the compass of a

<sup>25</sup> NL 9-66, 83, 85.

dainty yet comprehensive miniature. Operant in these higher ranges, his curiosity is purged of all trace of egotism. It seems to aim with an exclusive devotion at understanding what it studies by elucidating its titles to esteem. It is an intelligence in search of light, not a "soul" in search of adventures.

Quick sympathies and lively antipathies are the basis of critical impressions, but in most of us they dominate with an alternating despotism. Sainte-Beuve mediates between them with the most delicate poise. One reader, for example, will admire Cicero without reservations and with never a qualm at the impotence of his thought to reach the higher levels of speculation. Another reader finds Cicero flatly commonplace. Sainte-Beuve does neither. He perceives the limitations of Cicero's philosophizing, but he also catches the peculiar aroma which goes so far to redeem and sometimes even to exalt the Ciceronian commonplace. "All the commonplaces of Cicero," he says, "are so fine, so specious, they do so much honor to civil society and to human nature, they are accompanied by such a noble fold and such a grand sweep of the toga, that one readily conceives how dear they must be to all those who are not so much inexorable observers of politics and keen analysts of human nature as eloquent advocates of a cause."<sup>26</sup> That is balanced judgment; it is discerning, it is just, and it is finely appreciative. Such complex and many-sided vision is not the product of ripe good sense alone. That is a less catholic faculty and inclines to a simpler and more outright verdict. This more comprehensive survey rests on a peculiar richness of impressions elicited in swift and overlapping complexity by the successive aspects of the object studied. All this is, so to speak, implicated in the object itself: it is seen, it is felt. There is nothing of constraining system and logical apparatus. But if far removed from the dogmatist with his rules and his models, we are even farther removed from the ultra-impressionist who makes judgment equivalent to individual caprice. Sainte-Beuve believes that im-

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<sup>26</sup> CL 14-186.



pressions are right or wrong. They are the forerunners of judgment, which in its turn is right or wrong along with them. He does not say, with Anatole France, *quot homines tot sententiae*; he says the very contrary: "I have often observed that when two intelligent men arrive at totally different estimates of an author, it is ten to one that they are not for the moment fixing their attention on the same object and on the same works or the same portions of his work; it is because they do not envisage him entire and do not embrace him full circle. A wider range of observation and of knowledge would resolve their differences and bring them to an agreement. Yet there subsists, even within the regular and graded circle of legitimate homage, a certain latitude that must be allowed to the diversity of tastes, of tempers, and of time."<sup>27</sup>

That allows for liberty, but it also provides for judgment. Sainte-Beuve does not repudiate the final test of the judicial critic: he makes genius morally responsible for the tone and tendency of its work. His criticism of Goethe's "Werther"<sup>28</sup> is an excellent example of the penetrating moral analysis that he applies to literature. He points out two strands of inspiration in "Werther," the joy and intoxication of youth, in which he finds the genuine and sincere Goethe, and the triple gloom, despair, and suicide out of which the conclusion is concocted, which he finds false and commonplace, although this is precisely the portion of the work that the great reading public has laid hold of. Goethe, he adds, cured himself of his romantic malady by painting it, but he inoculated others with the disease. That is the vice of the book.

"Would he have concluded as he has, had he foreseen all the effect of his novel, which he has compared to that of the match which sets fire to a mine? It is difficult for an artist to resist the temptation of a lucky hit. The sound, vigorous, and large-hearted artist has substituted for his own healing method, which he kept secret, a sickly and trivial solution adapted for the common crowd. The

<sup>27</sup> CL 15-381.

<sup>28</sup> CL 11-289.



close of 'Werther' set up in the public eye a false Goethe instead of the true one, a hollow and deceptive phantom. . . . Nowadays, for the definitive judgment of the book and its due ranking in the hierarchy of art, this dénouement of 'Werther' redounds to the damage of the rest, and when we consider how utterly different was the character of the author and what a totally diverse path his life took, we have difficulty in not suspecting that we are the victims of a mystification."

The doctrine that an author must take thought for the influence exercised by his work is one with which most men over thirty will agree; the perception that the opposite doctrine is as commonplace as it is false, is perhaps one that requires some critical initiation. It is a recurrent one in Sainte-Beuve.

Sainte-Beuve thus points steadily in the direction of an objective and judicial criticism, not rigid and dogmatic like Boileau's, yet aiming by a common discipline and a common tradition at a sound orthodoxy, precise though not precisian and pure though not puritanical, recognizing with discriminating insight the difference between sacred and profane and between high and low. His own peculiar talent is rather to pave and point the way for just judgment than to formulate and enforce it. If he impresses us as not having judged enough, he has, beyond all others, mapped out the whole conflicting tangle of facts and of doubts, of obstacles and aids to judgment, that render the function of the truly judicial critic so taxing on his insight, and even his modesty. Of the whole body of precedent that legitimates judgment and of the whole system of cross-examination that corroborates it Sainte-Beuve is a consummate master, and for those who wish to study its modes of procedure he is an incomparable initiator—its code others, perhaps, discourse on more conclusively.

## X

### THE CRITIC: THE PORTRAIT-PAINTER

A perfect judge will read each work of wit  
With the same spirit that its author writ.

—*Pope*

“True criticism, as I conceive and define it,” says Sainte-Beuve, “consists more than ever in studying each being, that is, each author, each talent, according to the conditions of its nature, in giving of it a living and loyal description, on condition, however, of classing it afterwards and ranking it in the hierarchy of art.”

Sainte-Beuve is therefore only secondarily a critic in the time-honored sense of the word, the analyst of a book as a work of art or as an embodiment of ideas. A book is for him above all an expression of talent realizing itself in definite form. As Emerson says: “There must be a man behind the book; a personality which by birth and quality is pledged to the qualities there set forth.” Sainte-Beuve’s criticism thus becomes largely a kind of biography centered in psychologic portraiture.

He has an innate taste, equal to his innate talent, for this species of interpretative biography. He wishes to know an author in the flesh and blood, in his habit as he lived, and not as a disembodied spirit haunting posterity in octavo or duodecimo form. To what extent this turn is an instinctive one in Sainte-Beuve is evident in his earliest work. At the age of twenty-four, in an essay on Corneille, he already expresses a predilection for “large, copious, and at times even diffuse histories of an author and his works, which enable us to penetrate into the writer, to install ourselves in his spirit, to paint him in his various aspects, to make him live, move, and speak as he must have done in reality; to follow him into his home-life and his domestic habits as intimately as possible, to connect him in every way with

this world, with this actual existence and those every-day habits by which great men are bound not less than others, this genuine foundation on which they stand, from which they rise to take their upward flight for a time, and to which they invariably fall back.”<sup>1</sup> We see here his love of the concrete and the vital in opposition to the pale abstractions of the intelligence—even of the most philosophic and truly architectural intelligence.

“Let us not have too many metaphysical poets and painters, I conjure you; let us not have too many gentlemen of the empyrean and abstracters of quintessence: two or three in a generation are enough; let us set them up in the high places as things of rarity deserving to be exhibited; but let us keep them for the great Sundays.”<sup>2</sup>

Like the most cultivated of Germans, Goethe, this most cultivated of Frenchmen refused to sacrifice—and sometimes even preferred—nature to culture.

In themselves biographic details of this order respond only to the instinct of curiosity and are often the merest gossip. But though Sainte-Beuve is something of a gossip himself and retails scandal with a certain gusto, this is only rarely insignificant. It is usually redolent of personality and betrays some deep-hidden secret of the spiritual *ménage* of genius with the mortal whom it has elected for its partner. Sainte-Beuve reads between the lines of his literary documents. He applies his power of divination to extract the truth from the half-truth that is substituted for it, sometimes by the voluntary, oftener still by the involuntary, trickery of human nature, which achieves such consummate skill in deceiving others only because it has perfected this skill by unremitting practice in deceiving itself. We say, and rightly, that for knowing an author there is no source so precious as his correspondence. Yet with what caution we must read it! As Sainte-Beuve says: “In general we must never trust correspondence except in a limited measure, for we always model ourselves in a certain degree on the person to whom we write. Every intelligent

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<sup>1</sup> PL 1-29.

<sup>2</sup> NL 5-149.

man, if he possess a tried and mobile mind, when he takes up his pen to write a letter is a little like Alcibiades, and clothes himself more or less in the colors of the person addressed. How then if one's personal desire and the ambition to please are enlisted?"<sup>3</sup> Sainte-Beuve extends this nice caution to literature in general. By a gentle pressure, by subtle cross-questioning, by cunning interpretation, he builds up a consistent exposition of a soul that seems to have unburdened itself of its inmost secrets in the confessional, when in reality it has, as likely as not, been endeavoring to deceive both itself and us with fine phrases and ingratiating poses. So much store does Sainte-Beuve set by these tell-tale and perishable materials that he is more than half inclined to believe that the final truth about any man is known only by his contemporaries, and only by an infinitesimal few among them.

"After a certain lapse of time, truth, detailed and wholly real, is no longer attainable; it is often indeed already unattainable among contemporaries. We must, then, either give ourselves up to an absolute and fatal scepticism, or resign ourselves to that large manner which reproduces not so much the individual in himself as the ideas to which he contributed and which are personified in his name."<sup>4</sup>

Sainte-Beuve has so keen a sense for the particular coloring of a given moment in the past, that he sometimes hints that no amount of posthumous initiation can ever enable us to repeat the lost experience in its virtual integrity. Speaking of a once greatly admired poem of Millevoye, he says: "It is impossible for us aliens in time, educated to relish a different kind of defects, ever to feel for these pages, I will not say the old enthusiasm but any predilection whatever. The faint color is so faded that we no longer even discern it."<sup>5</sup> Many a page in the literature of the past, many a transitory gleam of old-time modes of feeling or thinking, tantalize the critic with the alluring suggestion of a lost secret like the Tyrian purple. They are ancient history.

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<sup>3</sup> PC 5-288.

<sup>4</sup> PC 2-299.

<sup>5</sup> PL 1-418.



Sainte-Beuve was, however, of all men the least willing to give up the individual and to reduce him to mere ancient history. In spite of the difficulty, he valiantly attempts, even in dealing with the older authors, to wring from the avaricious hand of time the precious particles of truth that it tries to withhold from posterity. He devotes himself with infinite zeal to piecing together the scattered fragments of personalities long since effaced and to reanimating the *disjecta membra* of lost lives. According to Pascal, the more intelligent a man is, the more he sees of diversity in other men. In this respect, no one was ever more intelligent than Sainte-Beuve. No two men are ever alike for him (despite his faint hope that we may in time learn the science of grouping them into families!). His bent for detecting the special qualities of each man seems almost co-extensive with that of nature in varying them. With what convincing skill he can set up in ten lines a life-sized human figure! Take, for example, this condensed but complete portrait, sketched in passing, of a man on whom Sainte-Beuve has never touched in any serious manner before or since.

"Monsieur Mohl was a learned Orientalist, and, what is even better than a scholar, a sage, an intelligence clear, loyal, broad, a German mind that had passed through the English filter, without a single turbid shade or a cloud, an open and limpid mirror, a moral nature all purity and candor; he had early shed all illusions, and showed it by a vein of irony free from any bitterness; his forehead was denuded by time, yet his laughter was that of a child; he had an intellect akin to Goethe's, except that it lacked every trace of vivid color and carefully eschewed every aesthetic appeal as a temptation toward falsehood."<sup>6</sup> The little thumbnail sketch offers the programme for a whole dissertation.

Let us cite another example. In an essay devoted to a very modest, quiet, and nowise showy scholar and critic, Magnin, Sainte-Beuve is led incidentally to throw in a por-

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<sup>6</sup> NL 13-235.

trait of a once much acclaimed and presently much neglected academic orator, Lerminier, another of the many writers whom he has never treated except in an occasional manner. This casual portrait is, for its broad sweep, its incisive phrasing, its picturesque and unforgettable characterization, worthy of Saint-Simon, and has not a little of his defiant and imperious touch.

"A mind and a talent are not defined in their essential nature, it seems to me, until we have been able to summon up the diametrically opposed type. Now the contrary, the opposite, and, if I may venture the word, the antipathy of M. Magnin was Lerminier. Who among us does not remember this man, for whom oblivion perhaps were better? Yet how brilliant were his beginnings! What fine and grandiose hopes he inspired! What serious studies he had undertaken and valiantly inaugurated! How auspiciously and how splendidly! An audacious and ambitious nature that all too soon gave the lie to itself, a talent all pomp of phrase and gilded surface, all show and ostentation, clarinet and cymbal, the noisy choregus of the younger generation, a revolutionary Mumbo-Jumbo that a sudden gust of wind unmasked and upset, whom we had heard but now playing the generalissimo and commanding the charge, and whom we beheld all of a sudden pitched headlong and routed from the field like a drum-major minus his army; in the end a sorry and discredited figure, a mere naked temperament, fallen from passion into appetite. Yet even in his last years, and even in those writings which no longer found any readers, he still had flashes of his old-time brilliancy and reminiscences of the serious researches of his early days. Lerminier, in his moods of self-importance and pride, allowed himself to look down on the modest and studious M. Magnin with haughty airs, and felt for him a certain disdain which he took no care to conceal. . . . He could not see that, as in a race, he who keeps going always, without stopping a single instant, though moving but slowly, will outdistance the one who rushes madly forward with random leaps and bounds. He could not see that M. Magnin

would reach much nearer to the goal of which he himself, with all his impetuosity, would fall so far short. Lerminier was only a mock-genius destined to be precociously shattered and extinguished.”<sup>7</sup>

The great metropolitan journals are said to keep on hand a so-called “Cemetery,” obituary notes on all the great men of the day, articles in embryo that only await a signal to begin walking the earth the moment that necrologic exigencies sanction their release from the tomb. Sainte-Beuve had a similar gallery of great men, past and present, lodged in his capacious memory. The multitude of passing apparitions on the stage of literature or history, which for other men are only vague names, seem to exist for him with all the vivid colors of reality. So minutely faithful is his vision of the past that he conveys the impression of having lived these three hundred years, and of having spent the broad margin of a leisurely life in daily and intimate association with the great and the learned and with all those who clustered about them, from their equals and rivals down to their courtiers and confidants—and sometimes even down to their valets and their cooks.

This opens the whole field of anecdote, and anecdotes are a very large element in Sainte-Beuve’s criticism. A whole volume of them might be culled from his work, and a not inconsiderable knowledge of French literature might be derived from such a volume. This device is, of course, no-wise new. It is as old as human curiosity, and was perhaps originally practiced in some awkward fashion, by our first parents as they began to grow in experience. Even a critic so disdainful of gossip as Johnson indulged in it in a desultory way, for it seems that he once made a journey to the town of the poet Young’s housekeeper, in order to learn the “domestic manners and petty habits” of the poet, but alas, only to find that his oracle had died two days previously! A resolutely impersonal critic like Brunetière would have felt that this admirable woman deserved canonization for her discreetly timed retreat, but we may be sure that this

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<sup>7</sup> NL 5-464.



funereal evasion would have seemed to Sainte-Beuve nothing less than deplorable.

The biographic method of Sainte-Beuve has no relation to the continuous life-history from the cradle to the grave in which event upon event is recorded simply because it occurred. He does not imitate the manner of a certain literary historiographer who conscientiously begins: "William Collins, one of the greatest masters of the British lyre, was born at Chichester in 1720, where his father was a hatter." He picks out the few events, often singularly unimportant as such, often forgotten by the actor himself, which reveal the color of the times or the character of the man. His biographies are made up of a few anecdotes ingeniously interpreted so as to reveal the secret flow of the inner life. This is not at all a novel device, though its free use in the solemn precincts of criticism was in the nature of a startling innovation. The anecdote is the means by which we commonly humanize our judgment of a character. It is the realistic method of approach, because it has its basis in life. It is not in itself a very sure key to the mystery of personality, because it opens only a single door at a time; and tends, by the extreme vividness with which it reveals a small area, to make this tyrannically predominate in our impression of the whole. We run the risk of mistaking the exposure of a characteristic for the exposition of a character. "The secret anecdote," says Sainte-Beuve, referring to the particular variety that we associate with Suetonius and Procopius, "becomes enormous and monstrous in the retrospect . . . a bait flung out to our sensual curiosity, by which the unwary reader is enticed and caught."<sup>8</sup> The same thing may be said of other anecdotes of a less special kind. The rich series in which Sainte-Beuve has revealed the weaknesses and the pettinesses of so many men of letters, has unquestionably humanized them and saved us from the exaggerations and the illusions that attend on hero-worship where there is no hero. They are a homage to truth and to justice. Unhappily, the "disenchanted anec-

<sup>8</sup> NL 2-221.



dote" not only has more vividness and piquancy than others, it also has more vitality. It is therefore disproportionately abundant. We have more material for the study of human weakness than for the study of human virtue. "History," says Emerson, "is a train of felonies." And the proverb assures us that the good have no history. What is true of history is in a measure true of biography. The little unremembered acts of kindness tend to be thrown into the shade by the little, remembered acts of villainy. Even Sainte-Beuve's marvellous faculty for "desupernaturalizing genius" was not fully offset by a capacity for preserving all the glory of what he left intact. That, unhappily, is possible only if one retain a little illusion. No man is a hero to his valet—or to his critic if uncompromisingly critical.

The anecdote, however, if taken by the reader *cum grano*, is as convenient as it is indispensable in critical portraiture. It often fixes indelibly a trait of character; it sums up picturesquely a personality; it conveys indirectly what it might seem ungracious to formulate; it gives us the pleasure, so dear to human nature, of smiling at a weakness in a fellow-mortal. Though not altogether just or ideally true, it gives us lucidity on the most economical terms and in the most lively form. The fact that Sainte-Beuve is seldom distinctly humorous should not blind us to the fact that he enjoys the comic touch in passing, and likes to sketch in a grimace in his portraits—even though it flit across a solemn and right-reverend face; in fact, the greater the incongruity the greater his mischievous pleasure. He does not shrink—and why should he?—from depicting the sexagenarian author of the "Génie du Christianisme" daily sallying forth from home and wife, with a flower in his button-hole, to seek relief from the oppression of virtuous domesticity in the society of his numerous "*madames*." He depicts de Vigny delivering his inaugural speech at the Academy and pausing to note down the applause with a gold pen. He says of Michaud: "He was a journalist to the finger-tips—

and he had very black ones. His wife said that when he took a bath he put on gloves in order not to wash his hands.”<sup>9</sup>

Such anecdotes reveal a single and sometimes gigantic weakness; nothing more. Other anecdotes carry a larger suggestiveness, and afford at least a shrewd hint as to a whole character. How much of Chateaubriand, of the singular combination of grandeur (a little inflated), of heedless egotism, of romantic extravagance, and of fundamental insincerity, is condensed in the confines of this single anecdote:

“During the stay of Chateaubriand at Geneva after the July Revolution, he hit on the notion one morning that it would be a fine death, and a becoming and a grandiose death, to go off and die on Mont-Blanc: *Ardentem frigidus Ætnam*, etc.; or at least he said something to inspire this belief. As soon as this was known or suspected, an incessant vigilance surrounded him: Madame de Chateaubriand and Madame Récamier were in agonies of terror, and watched in relays so as never to lose sight of him; scarcely had he issued forth alone, when he was overtaken and his steps dogged; until at last all were reassured in the belief that this sublime velleity had vanished and that other ideas were revolving in the head of this great concocter of fine phrases and pictures.”<sup>10</sup>

Lamartine, the poet so heedless of the truth of things, the statesman so culpably irresponsible, the man so spell-bound by his own charms and his own eloquence, in short the amiable “charlatan” that he was to Sainte-Beuve and to many other keen-eyed contemporaries, stands out life-sized in the following stories:

“One day, while talking at Madame Récamier’s about the salt-tax, he gave all sorts of reasons in its favor: it weighed very lightly on the consumer, and it afforded a great inflow into the Treasury. ‘I am delighted,’ said M. de Chateaubriand, ‘to hear you maintain this, for I had heard that you were opposed to the tax.’ ‘Ah, that’s true,’ answered Lamartine, ‘they came to solicit my cooperation,

<sup>9</sup> CL 11-486.

<sup>10</sup> CL 11-447.

and I promised to stand for the abolition of the tax; but I am convinced that it is really less onerous than useful.' So in all matters; at the Academy his whole conduct is of this order. He learns one day that M. Pasquier thinks of presenting himself and is sounding his friends; Lamartine, of his own accord, writes to him and complains of having been omitted from the list of those friends who could be counted on, whereas he himself has by no means forgotten that he owes to M. Pasquier his nomination to a diplomatic post . . . In short, he offers his vote. M. Pasquier answers in the cordial tone which such an offer invites. Yet, on the day of the election, Lamartine votes for some one else! A neighbor interrupts: 'Why! I thought you were voting for M. Pasquier?' 'Bah!' he answers, 'my vote would no doubt be useless to him, he will have quite enough without it.'"<sup>11</sup>

Are we likely to take Vigny's claims to philosophic wisdom with complete seriousness after such a sweeping glance into the inner sanctum of his spirit as Sainte-Beuve gives us in this little scene: The elderly Vigny is exhibiting some drawings to a young lady in his salon. The bell rings. Vigny looks grave and cries out to his visitor: "Mademoiselle, let us resume our places; we must be found seated." The astonished young lady with difficulty kept from laughing in his face. They hardly knew each other, and were on a footing of ceremony. "But," adds Sainte-Beuve, "Vigny believes himself very dangerous, and even fears to appear too much so." And he draws the moral of the tale: "Let us praise the talent, but let us also not ignore the man in his last phase."<sup>12</sup>

A single anecdote serves to throw an even more glaring illumination on the enigmatic personality of Lamennais. His letters (about 1830) are all overflowing with encomiums of a certain Rubichon; he is continually asking: "Have you read Rubichon, the remarkable, the profound, the original, the admirable Rubichon?" If you have, you discover, according to Sainte-Beuve, an absurd and fanatical plea for absolutism, a proposal to transfer the French government

<sup>11</sup> CL 11-463.

<sup>12</sup> CL 11-526.



from free-thinking Paris, that "sewer of Europe," to Bourges, because Bourges is the most gloomy, monotonous, wearisome, and arid spot in France; here the king and his grave counsellors would work undisturbed, "just as Milton," Rubichon adds, "so mediocre in all he wrote while he enjoyed his sight, waxed sublime and wrote 'Paradise Lost' as soon as he became blind and was no longer distracted from his inspirations and his meditations."<sup>13</sup> The whole tragedy-comedy of Lamennais' career is foreshadowed in his enthusiasm for this fantastic nonsense on the very eve of his own transit to the most radical democracy. The heavy alloy of wilfulness and fanaticism which neutralized the nobility of his character and rendered him the most perilous of guides to a distracted age, is made so evident that we feel we have got the key to half his character.

The anecdote also plays a large part in Sainte-Beuve's criticism as a literary ornament, a flower that rises into sudden bloom in the midst of a disquisition, or that pleasantly arrests and reposes the eye at the terminus of some little bypath of his thought. In the course of a critical discussion in which men tend to melt into ideas, suddenly the curtain rises, discussion turns into drama, and the ideas turn into men. Sainte-Beuve has been describing the distressful style of a certain very antipathetic contemporary. He says: "There is one essential thing that he never learned and will never know: the art of writing." And here, without continuing any further this ungracious tone, he retails one sufficing little episode and the topic is as conclusively disposed of as it could be in a whole treatise: "One day, in the presence of M. de Chateaubriand, the discussion turned on style and the endless care that it demands. M. de Chateaubriand, who was that day in a communicative humor, talked like a master on this supreme and delicate art. M. Ballanche, who was present, and who, in such a matter, had some right to be heard likewise, spoke in his turn and dilated on the difficulties of style. I believe that some other distinguished writers, though not by any means

<sup>13</sup> NL 9-184.



rivals of these two, also added some timid remarks. 'But,' cried M. Delécluze, who was among the listeners, 'as for me—it's astonishing!—I assure you that for years I have never erased a word.'—All the others smiled."<sup>14</sup>

On another occasion Sainte-Beuve is trying to render adequately the utter weariness and desolation of spirit felt by himself and some of his Academic brethren at the reading of a less than mediocre prize poem. Vigny—to whom Sainte-Beuve seldom cares to be agreeable—was the reader (though he was not the author) and he read with a slow and insistent pomp of manner which served only to make the dullness more deadly: "I know of nothing more irritating," Sainte-Beuve adds, "than a reader who, in such a situation, pauses smilingly over every stilted verse as if to say: How charming! . . . Some of us escaped; some, with silent recrimination, sat it out. I confess that I was one of these: once even I had cried out aloud. M. de Sacy, who had staid to the bitter end and who had listened in silence, had suffered more than any one from this affront to his good sense, his cult of good French, and his respect for good logic, the logic of Port-Royal. He returned home after the sitting,—he felt indisposed; he was so for several days. There you have an indisposition worthy of Boileau, one which does honor to the sufferer, and which proves, if not the toughness of his nerves, at least the soundness of his wit."<sup>15</sup> That accomplishes its ostensible object, to give the reader a glimpse of the courteous personality of a man of taste; at the same time it gives him the pleasure—and the incidental profit—of laughing at a bad poem, and it gives Sainte-Beuve himself the satisfaction of once more exposing with apparent guilelessness the "shining veneer of fatuity" that so much irritated him in Vigny.

This personal approach to literature through the author, this prefixing of his portrait as a frontispiece and a spiritual guide to his work, is so integral a part of Sainte-Beuve's criticism that his method, if he may be said to have a method, is to be found here and not elsewhere. His origi-

<sup>14</sup> NL 3-82.

<sup>15</sup> CL 14-194.

nality lies in the unique excellence of his practice, in the unexampled diagnostic tact with which he carried on his study of the individual.

“One cannot employ too many devices and modes of approach, if one wishes to know a man otherwise than as a mere spirit. As long as we have not put to ourselves, regarding a writer, a certain number of questions, as long as we have not answered these, though only privately perhaps and in a whisper, we are not sure that we have grasped him entire, even should these questions seem utterly remote from the nature of his writings:—What did he think as to religion?—How was he affected by the spectacle of nature?—How did he comport himself as to women? As to money?—Was he rich? Was he poor?—What was his regimen, his daily mode of life? And finally, what was his vice or his weakness? Every man has one. None of these matters is indifferent for those who would judge the author of a book and the book itself, if the book is not a treatise on pure geometry, above all if it is a literary work, that is to say a work into which there enters a little of everything.”<sup>16</sup>

All these questions and many more Sainte-Beuve prefers to put, with all sorts of delicate precautions and insinuating indirection, to the author himself. The corrections and variants his contemporaries will supply when the author fails to do so—or, finally, the divination of the critic. To question an author we have only to listen long and patiently; he will end by telling his secret, oftenest involuntarily.

“We shut ourselves up for a fortnight with the writings of some illustrious man who has passed away, some poet or philosopher. We study him, we see him from all sides, we interrogate him in leisurely fashion, and let him pose before us. It is almost as if we were passing a fortnight in the country, making a portrait or a bust of Byron, of Scott, or of Goethe . . . With the vague, abstract, and general type first seen there is mingled and incorporated by degrees an individual reality, precise and more and more accentuated

<sup>16</sup> NL 3-28.

and aglow with life; we see the resemblance taking shape and substance, and at last, at the moment when we have seized the familiar trick, the telltale smile, the indefinable deformation, the hidden line that pain has carved and that time unveils under the ever thinner growth of hair,—then at last analysis is swallowed up in creation, the portrait speaks and lives, we have found the man.”<sup>17</sup>

It is evident from such a passage that Sainte-Beuve is in complete revolt from the old-fashioned criticism which so reverently created the man of genius in the image of his work, which insisted on seeing its splendors and its grandeur reflected in his personality—and on seeing there nothing besides—the criticism typified by the ideal statue or the godlike bust.

There is a very constant danger that the individual shall be exalted into a type, embodying in high relief and idealized falsity some unduly simplified conception of the author as he chose to appear in his work, or as he posed in actual life, or as the public, in need of a hero or an apostle or a harlequin, capriciously chose to pose him. Then, as Sainte-Beuve suggests, legend supplants truth, and genius has only privileges and virtues: “Everything is allowed, what is wanting is supplied, everything is advantageously interpreted, the ambiguities, the untimely outbursts, the wanderings or obscurations of genius; everything is declared full of hidden meaning, of profundities, of passion or of penetration, of marvels of fantasy, such as at bottom never existed even for his nearest contemporaries.”<sup>18</sup> \*

There is of course a sort of justice (of a rather purely poetic order) in such admiring criticism. It is to be feared that our admiration for Shakespeare, for Molière, for Milton even, might suffer a little perturbation if we knew them as intimately in their human weakness as we know Byron or Carlyle. Does not the sage of Weimar himself suffer just a little from the zeal of those pious admirers who monumentalize his least significant acts,—who

<sup>17</sup> PL 1-239.

<sup>18</sup> CL 14-232.

\*Here follows an eloquent page on Musset as seen in apotheosis by the posthumous public of the Second Empire.



can even lecture for a whole semester on the list of subscribers to his first "Collected Works"? "How many deductions would have to be made," Sainte-Beuve suggests, "if we had in all cases the documentary basis for judging!"<sup>19</sup> Admirers, like disciples, are proverbially injudicious, and familiars are nearly always indiscreet as well as injudicious, yet it is they who in the main bear witness to the greatness of the great. Sainte-Beuve with his unerring tact did not by any means disregard this, and his fine taste made him aware that even among many truths we must choose those that are good to tell. "Let not his faults be remembered; he was a very great man," said Johnson, after Goldsmith's death. That is Johnson in an unwonted and chastened mood. Interpreted too charitably, this evasive urbanity has its perils: criticism may become intolerably good-natured, to the point of turning into pure eulogy. "Let not his faults be forgotten, though he was a very great man"—that would more nearly express the usual mood of Sainte-Beuve. "Every man has his vice," he says. He felt that greatness is entitled to no sweeping exemptions and cannot demand trial in a canonical court. The immortal genius and the mortal man both fall under his jurisdiction—only he believes that it is possible to tell the whole truth usually, and yet to tell it with tact and restraint. In criticizing a study of Newton, he says: "I should have preferred to see the stains, the weaknesses, and the pettinesses of the man, though clearly set down, less emphasized and weighing less in the balance with his greatness."<sup>20</sup> That is for him the true measure, the only one that humiliates neither genius nor truth. "It is by their greater sides that we must apprehend great men, and the shortcomings that it is permitted to note in them must melt into the total perspective. We must, in dealing with them, beware of the distorting anecdote."<sup>21</sup>

Though he sometimes regrets that we can see the great ancients only in dim remoteness, from the opposite bank

<sup>19</sup> PR 2-255.

<sup>20</sup> NL 10-93.

<sup>21</sup> CL 10-8.



of the river of time, at other moments he feels that it is not unfortunate either for them or for us that they conserve this austere and distant grandeur. *Maiores longinquo reverentia*. "The ancients, though they have suffered many outrages at the hands of time, owe to it this advantage at least that they have escaped the analysis of biographic curiosity. Those who have survived from the great shipwreck appear to us only from afar in all the beauty of their attitude." Sainte-Beuve regrets the publication of the *Journal* of the Abbé Le Dieu, the Boswell of Bossuet, but a Boswell who saw only the human image as miniaturized on his own diminutive retina. "It does honor to nobody," says Sainte-Beuve. "So few people know how to read, and it will be so easy to misuse this document. Misuse it—and against Bossuet! Who would dare? And yet, sooner or later, they will dare. . . The Abbé does not seek to decry Bossuet, but he subjects his illustrious master to an ordeal that no great figure could endure: he notes down, day by day, during Bossuet's last illness and his decline, every act and every cry of weakness that escape him."<sup>22</sup>

That is the dilemma which in some degree always confronts the biographers of great men. Such men lead an ideal life in their works which is in some measure independent of their everyday life. And, corresponding to this, they also lead an ideal life in the minds of their readers. There is at this remove from reality an interplay of legitimate and of illegitimate illusion. "I am only too willing, when I paint the portrait of a woman," Sainte-Beuve confesses, "not to push things to the extreme, to respect the cloud that envelops her, and to lend myself to certain illusions; I believe that in this I am still faithful to my model."<sup>23</sup> It requires little less than a miracle of skill to venture to handle truth itself with such freedom. Here, above all, it becomes apparent that criticism is not a science but a boundlessly exacting art. One can only exercise a scrupulously delicate taste and tact aided by a substantial infusion of charity. Sainte-Beuve has all the taste and tact

<sup>22</sup> CL 13-287.

<sup>23</sup> PL 3-292.

one could demand, but he does not usually manifest an excess of charity. He takes counsel a little too much from La Rochefoucauld, and hence his reputation as an enemy of pedestals. Yet in the presence of the very greatest, of the genuinely monumental figures, his taste and tact suffice. They operate in so subtle a manner, and render verdicts that proceed from a region so far below the surface, that they seem now and then to be in flat contradiction with the more superficial judgments that at first sight would appear self-evident. Sainte-Beuve deplores for example the severe and unjust strictures of Bossuet on Fénelon. And—this is significant—he adds that he would like to see them suppressed. He even speaks elsewhere of a guiding *principle* that leads him, in dealing with a great man, to single out, above all, his chief quality so as to avoid belittling him and seeing him from too low a level.<sup>24</sup> There is here a deeper action of taste than one would readily believe justified. Why wish to ignore the facts? Can truth be overruled? Sainte-Beuve's theoretical utterances run pretty uniformly counter to this notion, but his practice shows occasional, if rare, deviations from his theory. And, indeed, why should not taste, a tender sense for the spiritual proprieties, hesitate in the presence of certain truths, however irrefutable, if they are such as threaten by sheer contrast to imperil the integrity of the grand interior painting that we carry within us of genius in its sublimity? Why lend ear to the valet—or to those who play the part of valet to a great man whom they spy upon with over-sharpened yet uncomprehending eyes? Is Sainte-Beuve right when he assures us that “there are no valets' memoirs that are silly in the eyes of posterity”?<sup>25</sup> If so, may we not indict posterity itself as silly? I for one feel no bonds of obligation, either intellectual or moral, toward the audacious mortal who has tarnished the consecrated image of the mature and English Wordsworth by setting up beside it the counterfeit presentment of an immature and Gallic Wordsworth,—

<sup>24</sup> CL 13-102.

<sup>25</sup> CL 2-265.

Nequicquam Deus abscidit  
 Prudens Oceano dissociabili  
 Terras!

—a Wordsworth that in the end must have seemed as unreal to his own later self as he has every reason for seeming to us. Why drag out Annette Vallon from the tomb in order thus indecorously to couple the quick and the dead? There are some truths which yet are not intrinsically true enough to be grafted on our general notion of a man of genius seen as a unity. Just as some truths must be accepted on faith, others must be rejected on faith. If we are inexorable students of human nature, and nothing else, we shall demur at having any matter, however precious, rescued from beneath our scalpel, *Amicus Plato, sed magis amica Veritas!* But a more profound and less profane regard for human nature in its highest manifestations will make us glad, at times not too frequent, to forego the fruits of analysis in order to see, even with an admixture of innocent illusion, the sublime spectacle of genius standing just this side of apotheosis with its foot upraised to enter into immortality.

To sum up in Sainte-Beuve's own words: "Perhaps it is a duty not to tell everything about the great writers, to veil a side that is feeble, petty, useless, human, hostile to the statue. Certainly admiration, that vivifying soul of criticism, which it is so important to transmit, gains by this abstinence; the religion of genius is not violated."<sup>26</sup>

Observe that Sainte-Beuve introduces this last statement with a *perhaps*. That is because he has still a last remnant of hesitation. His theory, his method, are not at one with his taste. The main drift of his work is in another direction. *Vitam impendere vero* is his device. If he tends to grant plenary indulgence to a very select few—to no one, assuredly, among his contemporaries, or, I should even say, to no one this side of the seventeenth century—he tends also, in less gracious moods, a little to forget the special dispensation accorded. He protests somewhere against the

<sup>26</sup> PC 2-376.



French religion of Bossuet and Racine. He has his moments when statues, any statues, irritate him by their stony remoteness from flesh and blood reality. Nay, when he has himself, in the fervor of admiration, carved one of these and set it on high on its pedestal, he is apt to return to his work at a later date and, in a cooler and apparently repentant mood, to chisel some discordant inscription on its base. He appends to a portrait of Madame de Duras, a portrait done with the very lightest and the most flattering art, one of his disenchanting footnotes: "I have thus far presented the ideal, nothing but the ideal; I wish, however, by just one little random word to hint the blemishes. The world, even when not actually unjust or odious, has an unsympathetic way of thinking and saying things to which, though disagreeable, the moralist is not privileged to be wholly blind. A lady, who moved in the same circle as Madame de Duras, and who practiced justice to the point of severity, Madame de Boigne, said: 'Madame de Duras loved first her husband, then M. d'Angosse, then M. de Chateaubriand. She glosses over and colors all this a little in her letters to Madame Swetchine.'"<sup>27</sup> *Desinit in piscem mulier formosa superne.*

We are in touch with Sainte-Beuve in his habitual manner when, in much the same mood as here, he returns, after a long interval, to one of the contemporaries most present to his thought, Béranger: "I do not like conventional portraits, though they are dear to the public. It is always a ticklish thing to retouch one of these when it has been long on view and suits the general taste. It seems as if, in bringing out the excrescences and the discolorations, one were bent on defiling and outraging the model . . . yet the sole object is to restore the true physiognomy and to make the likeness complete."<sup>28</sup>

Did Sainte-Beuve attach too much importance to the excrescences and the discolorations in the picture? Did he fully realize that, fixed in a portrait, they acquire a greater prominence and shock us into a more lively and more distracting attentiveness than in real life, where the

<sup>27</sup> PF 79.

<sup>28</sup> NL 1-187.



play of the features and the pulsing of vitality duly subordinate them in the general concert? In criticism is not truth perhaps best achieved by subduing the tones, by understating reality, by letting charity veil the excrescence just a little and reduce the discoloration just a shade? It is a nice question. Sainte-Beuve, as a colorist, inclines temperamentally to an inexorable realism with no attenuations. When he writes with himself for his only reader, as he does in those copious note-books in which he jotted down his impressions day by day, he throws off sketch after sketch of his contemporaries snatched in their unguarded moments and their involuntary poses. He delineates with unsparing penetration, and stores up for future use, the physiognomic traits that he has caught on the fly; and as there are here none of the contrasting lights and shades that enrich expression and set off and harmonize idiosyncrasies and defects, none of the corrective modifications such as complete portraiture necessarily imposes, we seize the master's method, his primary drift, in its integrity. In the eleventh volume of the *Causeries* he has published nearly a hundred pages of these audaciously outspoken private pencillings. It is notable that, in contrast to the uniformly cheerful and almost uniformly equitable tone of the *Causeries*, Sainte-Beuve, indulging to the full his temperamental bias, is here, from beginning to end, censorious and acidulous, not to say bitter.

His recently published *Carnets* illustrate this tendency still more strikingly. Yet even there, the critic, distilling what he calls his *poisons*, is, like the witch-woman of Theocritus, still intently fashioning the image, as like as may be, of the one whom he flouts—and whom he once loved, perhaps. The distortion is not gratuitous.

If we abjure altogether the worshipful attitude with its pitfalls of illusion and of superficiality there still remain two very different solutions of this vexed problem. We may go behind the work to the man in the measure that seems necessary for a full comprehension of the work—and that measure is usually a very moderate one, unless the writer

has made himself his chief matter so that man and work are very nearly one, as in the case of Rousseau or Chateaubriand. Or we may go behind the work to the man in the measure that seems necessary for a full comprehension of the man—and that measure is a very expansive one. The numerous questions that Sainte-Beuve puts to a writer show that it is to this solution that he is pledged. Hence his criticism is in its essence biographic and psychologic rather than literary—even though it contrives to be at the same time the most exquisitely literary criticism that we know. The solution, in Sainte-Beuve's practice, is a fruitful one, it is perhaps the most substantial one, but it is not primarily a literary solution. Sainte-Beuve has sometimes painted the man so completely that his genius, the pretext for the painting, seems in the total result almost incidental. "I am not the man," he says, "to be satisfied with half-measure in the matter of biography." One might sum up his method in either of two ways: the life reveals the man; or: the work reveals the man.

Aller droit à l'auteur sous le masque du livre,  
Dire la clef secrète . . . .

In fact, neither genius nor works have always been necessary in order to invite the action of Sainte-Beuve's critical faculty. His primary interest was in the individual. An author was not for him a person who wrote (and perhaps lived), but a person who lived—and incidentally grafted some literary fruitage on the tree of life. Literature is at times only his pretext and history his real subject. And in either field he does not demand a great name but only an interesting figure. He deals largely with men who move in the periphery of history and with writers who have bequeathed names to literary history rather than works to literature. This preoccupation with minor figures attests genuine catholicity of interest as well as a scrupulous love of full and truthful portraiture. The essays on Eckermann's *Conversations with Goethe* (though not very fruitful, considering what a mine of ideas lay open to the

critic) are a good illustration.<sup>29</sup> Eckermann is Goethe's Boswell, with none of Boswell's dramatic gift, and with little dramatic material, it must be confessed, on which to exercise it. Eckermann is so lacking in mere picturesque appeal that most of his critics have appeared secretly to sympathize with Heine's mischievous lines in which the river at Weimar mourns with a double grief, first, because Goethe is dead, and secondly, because Eckermann still is alive! Sainte-Beuve has none of this facile scorn which we are all so ready to entertain for the literary statuettes that stand aligned in the dwarfing shadow of the giants. He devotes a half-dozen pages to the worthy Eckermann. Since Goethe's image is mirrored in Eckermann's mind, it seems to Sainte-Beuve worth while first to examine the mirror. Since he is himself but another such mirror, why scorn a humble confrère? *Humani nihil a me alienum!*

To a great extent, also, his rôle of intermediary between literature and the literary public accounts for his talking as often of a Cousin or a Thiers as of Bossuet or Fénelon. The *Revue des Deux Mondes* once refused an article on God as dealing with a subject of no contemporary interest. This was, as Sainte-Beuve knew only too well, very nearly as much the case with Bossuet and Fénelon, with Boileau and La Bruyère. Give us Barabbas! cry the public, lovers of the picturesque at any price. Inasmuch as he was a journalist and a reviewer, Sainte-Beuve's choice of subjects was, as he more than once bitterly complains, dictated by the exigencies of the hour and by the taste of his readers.<sup>30</sup> This drew him toward the latest rather than the greatest books—though he has spoken of these also as pertinently as any rival, if more briefly. The really great figures Sainte-Beuve never pretends to treat definitively, but, when he can, he returns to them a second and a third time. This disproportionate preoccupation with the secondary figures in literature has certain advantages and even greater disadvantages. Historically, the background of literature, the general movement of an age, thus approached from the lower and nearer

<sup>29</sup> NL 3-264.

<sup>30</sup> N. Corr. 188.



levels and from so many sides, is much more truly rendered in all its variety than if seen from some isolated mountain-top. But the view is less inspiring than from an Olympus. The great ideas live in the charmed circle of the truly great men. If Sainte-Beuve had dealt more with these, he would have been led more often to discuss large fundamental ideas and principles, an element too little introduced into the foreground of his criticism—as it is perhaps over-emphasized in the highly and somewhat drily intellectual criticism of his great successor Brunetière, who wrote so seldom of any but the great questions. At times too we are tempted to regret this prodigal play of talent in regions where we can only gropingly follow it. Sainte-Beuve studies with the same delicate skill the minor writers of the hour as he does the immortals of all time. Do we, who have perhaps never read a line of Hippolyte Rigault, care to know what were the faults and virtues of his manner? The essay on Daunou is full of Sainte-Beuve's subtlest analysis, yet how many of his readers could find a single page of Daunou's work conveniently at hand in their libraries (I will not say in their memories) to serve as a background for judgment? One wishes that Sainte-Beuve had been like Molière's Toinette, in her rôle of doctor, who heartily scorns all minor and common maladies and roams the world in search of unique and illustrious subjects for the display of her clinical skill. One regrets especially that he did not deal oftener with poets and poetry—he regretted it himself. He expresses, on the growingly rare occasions when he talks of the poets, a special joy in returning to his first love and in taking up a burden which, though no lighter than his usual one, seemed lighter "because it was of roses." There was so much in the way of delicate interpretation of the great classic and romantic poets that he might have given us, and which he has left for less inspired successors to give us. "Sainte-Beuve," says Scherer, "was our only great critic of poetry."

Sainte-Beuve, after paying due tribute to the magic of Chateaubriand's style, concludes, nevertheless, that the great master, by departing from the classic tradition and by



naturalizing poetic prose among the romantic generation, has wrought a very questionable revolution: he has "transported the capital of prose from Rome to Byzantium." May we not, with all due appreciation for the authentic miracles of Sainte-Beuve's art, say of him, in his turn, that he has, in similar fashion, displaced the centre of French criticism? It seems ungrateful to bring against one who has made criticism so supremely delightful and informing, a charge so fundamental. Yet nearly all nineteenth century critics, in renewing criticism, tended at the same time to dissolve it by exceeding the proper bounds of the art and making it either historical, or psychological, or scientific, by incorporating into it what to a purely literary critic would seem intrusive foreign elements. Sainte-Beuve is in this typical of the age. As he says, no man can escape the time he lives in, not even by resisting it. In his pursuit of the personal characteristic and of the salient and vivid feature he has shifted the centre of interest from the masterpiece to the master.

In any other critic of literature such a departure from tradition would seem not only questionable but almost fatal. In Sainte-Beuve's case it often seems negligible. His temper is so intimately literary, the atmosphere that he brings with him is so permeated with the spirit of letters, that whether he discourses of literature or of life we are tempted to exclaim in the manner of the Greek epigrammatist: O life! O literature! which of you has imitated the other?

Faguet, for example, in dealing with a purely literary figure, remains loyally literary in his criticism; he does not wander off into by-paths. Sainte-Beuve is often more curious of the man than of the writer. Yet Faguet gives us the impression that we are standing outside of literature and looking in, while Sainte-Beuve gives us the impression that we are standing inside and looking out.

The biographical method, as used by Sainte-Beuve, leads to such marvellous results that one hesitates indeed to question it, just as one hesitates to question the dramatic methods of Shakespeare. Yet in either case sheer individ-

ual genius would seem responsible for so large a share in the result that one may perhaps legitimately inquire whether in itself the method has not certain grave drawbacks. The biographical detail vivifies the narrative and often throws a given trait of character into the boldest relief. But how frequently the experience recorded might have fallen to the lot of a man of totally different personality; how frequently the same story has been related of half a dozen different men! And even when we have a hundred, or a thousand, authentic bits of biography of this kind, how wavering and how variable is the psychic picture we construct from them! Its fixity seems almost to be in inverse proportion to the richness of our data. There are twenty different Napoleons, says a recent French historian—and, even as he writes, the number grows. We reconstruct Cæsar and Hannibal more sparingly—perforce—and we have the feeling, or the illusion, that they are less enigmatic. In reality, they are only less documented. In human conduct a long interval separates the act from the motive, and another long interval separates the motive from the personality that entertained it and gave it its individual coloring. We learn the action, we calculate the motive, we conjecture the personality. Herein lies Sainte-Beuve's peculiar art; he restores these lost or hidden connections with such convincingness that the personality which he is studying seems itself restored to life. But in so far as this is accomplished it is accomplished by a rare gift of divination, an instinctive faculty for reading character. Others may have the same data and the same method, they will not achieve the same results. The magic lies in the gift. The method as such is better adapted for the study of historical than of literary characters—because in history we usually lack documentation of the intimate and self-revealing kind. The writer has furnished this in his works; and the true centre of literary criticism is in the work of the author, not in his biography, much as the latter may be made to serve for incidental suggestion and illumination. Sainte-Beuve tends to utilize literature as a document for the study of human na-

ture, rather than for its thought and its art. "The endowment and the character of authors occupy me even more than the drift of their work," he confesses.<sup>31</sup>

And though for his happy genius it meant the study of an ever varying series of individual human natures, this biographic particularization is almost bound to become for us a study of mere types of human nature. Chapelain walked through the mud and rain to the Academy: Chapelain therefore was miserly. Racine wrote bitter epigrams: Racine therefore was satirical. Southey proposed to outshine Herodotus: Southey therefore was vain. Goethe put his friends *tout vifs* into his "Werther"; Goethe therefore was unscrupulous. But even should these conjectures be correct, we are no wiser until we can estimate the coloring these traits derive from the personality that found expression in them. Without this illumination, the biographic detail is vulgarized by being bared of its characteristic raiment. We see in it less of the spirit and more of the body than in reality. For the actor the acts of his life exist mainly in the echoes they awaken, in the emotional memories they leave behind; for us spectators they exist mainly in themselves. They sometimes even seem to stand between us and the actor as so many barriers to a perfect understanding. For Musset and for George Sand their love-affair was mainly poetry; for us it is mainly scandal. And there is perhaps no writer that would suffer more—and withal more unjustly—than Sainte-Beuve if studied primarily from the biographic angle, as the existing biographies sufficiently attest.

Many of the questions that Sainte-Beuve puts to an author seem alien to the spirit of literature. Why inquire whether that dry old Jansenist Nicole had or had not let the love of woman mingle with his fear of God? It seems impertinent to ask this, and most critics would but ask the question fruitlessly. Yet Sainte-Beuve is so keenly alive to every sort of literary influence, to every rivulet that winds its way into the stream through the society that lines its

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<sup>31</sup> NL 9-180.



banks, that for him such a question at once takes on a literary aspect and significance. He notes a certain dryness in Nicole's style and a corresponding insensitiveness in his taste. Instead of seeing here only a reflex of the general grayness and austerity of the Jansenistic group, he at once points to the dearth of feminine influence in Nicole's life as the source of this defect: "To acquire the concision of La Rochefoucauld he would have needed the society of women, for they commonly have that natural limpidity of expression which we men have to acquire . . . I beg pardon for seeming frivolous: I am showing how taste is achieved."<sup>32</sup> The sceptical reader may still inquire whether Sainte-Beuve's prescription of a liberal dose of Madame de Longueville *jeune* would have imparted some of this desiderated quality to Nicole's style; he may even suggest that it was only achieved in Sainte-Beuve's own style after the feminine influence, with its solicitation to a coquettish prettiness of manner, had been withdrawn.\* The general doctrine is nevertheless an excellent one and goes a long way to explain some of the most signal virtues and characteristics of the literature of the age of Louis XIV. No one, for example, would dispute the justice of Sainte-Beuve's remark that Montaigne, had he known the refining influence of feminine friendship, might have suppressed a whole side of his thought which displeases and repels.<sup>33</sup>

There are, on the other hand, some questions that Sainte-Beuve fails to ask, or presses very lightly when asked. He speaks curiously little of the scholastic education of those of whom he writes, and apparently does not regard this prolonged sojourn in the ante-room of experience as very significant. He emphasizes always the sense for reality which contact with the world imposes on one's thought; he looks to it for that "freedom from what is scholastic, from that purely literary enthusiasm which

<sup>32</sup> PR 4-514.

\* Such considerations might even lead, in some despotic Utopia of the future, to anti-celibate legislation! A recent writer says regretfully: "Macaulay did not write for children and he abounds in words to them unintelligible. Had he been a married man, we might perhaps have had such a volume of historical sketches for boys as now we must wish for in vain." Quick, *Educational Reformers*, p. 488.

<sup>33</sup> CL 9-160.



savors of the class in rhetoric and prolongs it beyond its proper term."<sup>34</sup> What attracts him is the first steps of genius in the world, its earliest affiliations, the group of living and stimulating influences it falls into. The school in France is over-strenuous; and the French man of letters unlike his English brother, has little leisure there to develop his individuality. And the same is on the whole true of the University. Sainte-Beuve has no opportunities to paint incipient Miltons or maturing Grays.

Sainte-Beuve was profoundly aware of the interval which may in the same nature separate certain qualities from certain defects. Nature diverts herself at times by giving the lie to the majestic unity, whether in good or evil, that we love to impose on the often disparate inclusiveness of a personality. Are we not told by Mazarin's niece that "never did a man have such soft manners in public or such harsh ones in private"? We are not friendly to the complex portrait in which the *ride* traverses the *rayon*, and which reproduces all the pell-mell compoundure of high and low which Nature, that reckless artificer, mixes in the substance of man, of men of genius in particular—for few are able to live up to their genius. They are sometimes gold with just a mingling of alloy, and sometimes they are only baser metal streaked with gold. We demand an artificial simplification—angel or demon, according to Sainte-Beuve. It is perhaps to our credit that we rather prefer the angel—or is this because we tend unconsciously to identify ourselves, in the individual as well as in the species, with our friends on the shelf? "The worst of nearly all biographies," says Gladstone, "is that they contain nothing but praise." Sainte-Beuve refuses to "dissimulate and palliate and panegy-rize."<sup>35</sup> "Let us never weary of setting forth both sides of the truth, especially when the more agreeable one might make us forget the more essential one."<sup>36</sup> He therefore denounces the official biographers: "They would be capable of smoothing out the wrinkles in the portrait of an old man."

<sup>34</sup> PC 4-36.

<sup>35</sup> NL 12-54.

<sup>36</sup> NL 12-105 (note).

Even in dealing with youth still unwrinkled, he sought the forecast of the coming physiognomic grimace in the incipient deformations of the spirit. He would surprise in some random play of expression the often secret or but half-realized thought that inspired the work. Thus what, read only in the book, might have seemed but casual and might have been seen and forgotten as nothing more than a flashing phrase or a happy stroke of art, takes on a deeper and more vital significance. Under the shining surface of the page, as through a sudden rift, we discern the yawning deep of human life. We learn that all real literature is life and that the real book is the author; we acquire the true art of reading, that of reading between the lines the veiled reality of which the words are only the fallacious image. We learn what rate of discount to attach to a writer's words, what is his true weight and authority, what store of masks and disguises he has at his disposal, what final ineradicable dignity and worth his work holds in solution for those who know him as well as it and for whom the Sphinx is no longer buried knee-deep in the sand.

Sometimes the statue is thus exhumed from the engulfing sands only to gain more imposing dimensions and a more imperial grandeur—and sometimes it is extricated only to prove beyond peradventure that it rests on feet of clay:

“Monsieur Cousin, in one of those eloquent funeral orations in which he showed himself such a master, very adequately defined Charles Loyson in these few words: *a noble spirit, a tender soul, a youthful sage*. Standing with his foot on this half-open grave, with his arm solemnly stretched forth, he cried out in concluding:

“‘Yet one word, my dear Loyson. I have the conviction that you were faithful to your friends until the end, and that in your last moments when the consolation of our presence was refused you, you did not cease to believe that you were and will be remembered by those who knew you, and particularly by him whom you should have survived and for whom you will not long have to wait.’

"These last words produced, one may well believe it, a profound impression on the hearers; nothing was wanting for dramatic effect. Cousin was at that time in poor health, pale, threatened with consumption, or fancying himself so, as became a disciple of Plato's Phaedo, who aspires as soon as may be to enjoy immortality. This sort of rendezvous set for so near a date, which Cousin did not hesitate to give to the soul of Loyson, was happily put off for a long time, but it is just to add that, if he delayed a half-century in re-joining him, he never forgot him."<sup>37</sup>

In this delicate series of ironic touches the just perceptible theatricality, the unconscious subordination of the whole situation to himself, the oratorical alloy that always cheapened sentiment in Cousin, are all hinted with an art so lifelike that it seems only the candid reproduction of reality. Yet, after a few such partial portraits (and there is a considerable series of them scattered at judicious intervals through the *Causeries*, we are not likely any more to see M. Cousin (with his arm as ever solemnly outstretched) without remembering that he is a rhetorician practicing—on us. The same effect is repeated in a passage alluding to the patronizing tone employed by Cousin toward Jouffroy: "M. Cousin has a great talent for restoring his line when it has been broken; seeing Jouffroy dead, he solemnly took possession of him again on his grave."<sup>38</sup>

Sainte-Beuve holds that, in dealing with a woman, the first and almost the only question that arises, is: Did she ever love, and how did she love? The answer, he adds, in the case of Madame Récamier is an outright *No*. And he goes on to draw the hazardous conclusion that "this boundless need of loving felt by every tender soul was transformed in her into an infinite desire to charm, or better, to be loved, into a deep-rooted eagerness and a fervent desire to coin all this inner treasure into good-will."<sup>39</sup> It is possible—it is even probable—but is it certain? Might she not conceivably have been equally gracious, even though she had loved

<sup>37</sup> NL 11-414.

<sup>38</sup> CL 8-305.

<sup>39</sup> CL 1-125.



ardently? Might not this conjecture have seemed to Madame Récamier herself a gratuitous one? One cannot in truth maintain that this method of subtle conjecture from the facts of the outer life, or even from the spirit of a writer's work, to those of the inner life is uniformly convincing—it may even seem at times a little impertinent. Taine roused the indignation of Tennyson's admirers by picturing him, on the internal evidence of his poetry, as a voluptuary. Dr. Johnson, in his *Life* of the poet Thomson, says: "Savage, who lived much with Thomson, once told me he heard a lady remarking that she could gather from his works three parts of his character: that he was 'a great lover, a great swimmer, and rigorously abstinent'; but, said Savage, he knows not any love but that of the sex; he was perhaps never in cold water in his life; and he indulges himself in all the luxury that comes within his reach."

Another woman, who, like Madame Récamier, presided over a Parisian salon frequented for a time by Sainte-Beuve, was Madame Swetchine, a Russian, who, disappointed in love, became devout at the early age of seventeen. Sainte-Beuve finds the origin of her love of God in her love of man, and he goes on to point out in her religious ecstasy surviving traces of her secular emotion: "It is love still, subtilized, vaporized, percolating into adjoining tissues, and turned into intellection."<sup>40</sup> That is to feel very sure of reading a-right that complicated book, the female heart—not to add that even more obscure book, the Russian soul. One may well hesitate. Love, in all this, may have been as innocent a cause as the guide-post which directs you to the right when you might without it turn to the left. Life is in this way largely governed by ostensible causes which are only bridges between the real cause and the effect. Love may lead one to religion, but only because some more potent anterior cause makes one person in many ardently desirous of religion. What is the ultimate cause? It lies in personality, and not in the accidents of experience. This alone should interest the psychologist. The accident has only biographic

<sup>40</sup> NL 1-222.

significance. Without the bridge the stream would not have been crossed, but it is not because of the bridge that the stream is crossed. To reduce the desire to cross the stream into a secret desire to cross the bridge is in most cases a supersubtle fallacy. Nature, in order to lodge in the little hostelry of a single soul all the diverse qualities that knock at the door, must, it is true, suffer the necessity of making strange bedfellows, and only too often a tired and drowsy virtue reawakens from its slumbers to find with a start of surprise that some very incongruous companion has found shelter alongside of it. But it is unjust to discredit the virtue because of the accidental company that is thrust upon it—and love in a girl of seventeen is usually very much in the nature of accident, far more so than is a religious vocation which persists through after-life. To seek to identify the two is to be more bold than discreet. One runs the risk—if I may indulge in a very trivial illustration—of falling into the confusion of the bewildered traveler who shared the bed of a supposed negro, in reality of a jolly minstrel who mischievously divested himself of his sooty complexion and transferred it to his snoring companion so that the latter, on awakening, concluded perforce that he himself and not his blond bedfellow was the negro of the night before. Sainte-Beuve occasionally, by an over-bold identification of what seem interchangeable qualities, also unwarrantably blackens virtue. The disciples of Freud should be satisfied.

Into these outlying regions where conjecture, and even that most tenuous form of conjecture, suggestion, shape and reshape themselves in shifting outline, Sainte-Beuve is not unwilling to make an occasional foray. If a writer belongs very obviously to a *famille d'esprits* at whose sources we find some great literary ancestor, we see immediately a host of similarities that stand out half illumined and elucidated by the mere fact of kinship—and the very differences that separate the two writers are likewise made clearer by the more narrowly defined limits that hedge them in. In similar manner the disciple may throw light on the master—especially on the limits and the doubtful sides of his talent, on

his charm where it begins to be questionable without having as yet ceased to be charming, on his power where it has not ceased to command but just begins to show signs of possible fatigue or incipient strain. What we scarce ventured to question or avowedly to suspect in the master will find its analogue in the disciple, but with less of redeeming magic and a clearer betrayal of its insufficiency:

"The faults of the writer and of his special kind of composition may be retraced, more outstanding and enlarged, in the friend and follower of Saint François de Sales, in the good Bishop of Belley, Pierre Camus, who was the somewhat frolicsome Elisha of this radiant Elijah. This is a very legitimate method (if not too literally practiced) for apprehending in the pupil and follower the fault to which the master already inclined: in Rotrou, the overbold ventures and as it were the audacities of Corneille;\* in Campistron, the over-timid recoils and the pale spots of Racine, which he was at such pains to hide from us; in the Bishop of Belley, the reenforced prettinesses and the devotional arabesques of Saint François."<sup>41</sup>

A great writer may be seen as in a side-light in such members of his family as bear something of the same hereditary imprint. Thus Pascal may be seen as in a reflecting mirror in his sister Jacqueline, Chateaubriand in purer though abridged embodiment in his sister Lucile, Maurice de Guérin in the virginal Eugénie. In each case, the family resemblance is unmistakable:

Facies non omnibus una,  
Nec diversa tamen, qualem decet esse sororum.

The mystery that escapes us in the supreme genius may appear half unveiled in the paler copy. It is the same yet different, and the variations may serve as so many additional clues by which we may, from so many diverse points, direct our conjectures toward the yet unexplored centre.

Sainte-Beuve does not, despite their richness of detail, give out his portraits as complete. On the contrary, he says

\* "He is like a younger brother, who resembles his elder, but in his homely features only." PR 1-153.

<sup>41</sup> PR 1-241.



that he likes to return several times to the same subject in order to catch a new pose and to sketch in a new aspect. He recognizes that in the end much must remain unseen and unsaid. After a long and leisurely study of Duclos, he says: "In assembling these diverse and somewhat disparate facts, I have more than once felt how complicated is the character of a man, and with what care he who would remain truthful must avoid any systematic simplification. There is a degree of intimacy beyond which it is not given to man to go in the study of his fellow-man. It is a secret which has been reserved for himself by the great Anatomist of hearts."<sup>42</sup>

Nothing could less resemble the bold outline sketching, all in black and white, of the school which simplifies and systematizes a human physiognomy until all the separate features fall into line behind one central trait and seem only varied expressions repeating it in a series of receding vistas. *Ab uno disce omnes*. To Taine man was a zoological species reducible to a few formulæ. To Sainte-Beuve he was an enigma with a thousand readings, each in its turn resolvable into as many more, in short, a brief abstract and epitome of the infinite. To Taine, in dealing with Shakespeare, it seems necessary "only to grasp the dominant faculty in order to see the whole artist develop like a flower." Sainte-Beuve compared his botanizing among human spirits to the botanizing among plants practiced by the groping forerunners of Jussieu and Linnæus. The most insignificant writer was a riddle to be only partially and tentatively read, *pedetentim*. He aims by patient study to form a conception not altogether wide of the mark, not too fixed, for dogmatism does violence to the capricious opulence of nature, and not too floating, for such truth as we imperfectly apprehend cannot be grasped without outlines and confines. He modestly concludes a study of Bossuet: "This time, in the presence of so great a subject, and at the foot of the statue, let it suffice to have ventured a timid stroke with my chisel, to have given what I call a first touch."<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> CL 9-260.

<sup>43</sup> CL 10-216.

Sainte-Beuve's portraits owe their enduring quality largely to the realistic erudition on which they repose. In his study of the past, he leaves no stone unturned: even the smallest may be inscribed with some tell-tale record, and may be what Taine calls a sign. "I would go to the end of the earth," he says, "for a minute detail, as a rabid geologist would go there for a pebble."<sup>44</sup> Even the remotest excursion, intelligently directed, may yield some literary fruit. In dealing with Pascal Sainte-Beuve suggests that to get at the whole man it would be desirable to learn from some mathematician who happened to be of a superior order, endowed with taste and philosophy, what was the peculiar quality of Pascal's mathematical talent, its similarity or dissimilarity to that of other great geometers, and its relation to his literary talent.<sup>45</sup> In short, everything has diagnostic value for Sainte-Beuve. Take such a page as the following one on Madame de Sablé—how much reading, what an ample skein of threads plucked one by one from the texture of the past, is, without the slightest visible hint of labored learning, woven into a fabric as enduring as it is light:

"One may conjure her up as she was during these many years, with one foot in the world and one in the cloister, hearing of everything, on the watch for everything, meditating between these two opposites, making herself the centre of the most serious-minded group of worldly wits and of the most brilliant representatives of theology; eager for the slightest items of news as she is greedy for the new books; contriving henceforth to interest in herself and in her salvation the learned doctors, those flowers of grace blooming in the desert, while still retaining the choicest of her old-time friends; having at hand her austere confessor, yet not dismissing her cook; consulting her physician and her ghostly adviser as to her sick headaches and her conscientious scruples; instituting conferences and colloquies, and having discussions carried on before her in her chamber; feeling herself helped by the prayers of the commun-

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Corr. 2-122.

<sup>45</sup> PR 3-317.

ity on days when she partook of the sacrament, and paying them back by her wonder-working concoctions and her all-curing elixirs, and also, could she but have had her way, by her jellies and her jams; not denying herself in truth anything save what was now absolutely out of the question. What could have been for her, now that she was past fifty, more flattering and more rich in consideration than such a life? And in what way could she thenceforth have found an outlet and a diversion for all this refinement of self-love, for this preoccupation with her health, with her person, and with her soul (all in one), this desire to exercise her wits, and this fear of boredom and oblivious neglect, this fear of death? In what way could she have better satisfied without misgiving the thousand sentiments and caprices that were combined and ingrained in her? Just as she had done during the palmy days of Monsieur de Montmorency, she still retained a kind of court, still lived in a kind of giddy whirl. Her ego (to speak like Nicole) had never felt itself more ramified, more multiplied, more rooted in others, more solaced, tickled, coddled, and occupied. She had never been more beset."<sup>46</sup>

Here we have, as if distilled into one of her own magical elixirs, the whole soul (and body) of Madame de Sablé. The knowledge that goes into such a highly-colored sketch is mainly of an esoteric kind; it is knowledge gathered, not to feed the mere appetite for tangible literalities, but to satisfy an essentially moral curiosity that follows, with the keen-scented gait of a Laconian hound, the footprints of a human passer. Far more than semi-official documents of any sort, however authoritative as to mere facts, Sainte-Beuve values contemporary testimony derived from close personal contact and still warm with the life of real feeling and retaining the vividness of ocular observation. "There is nothing so lying as documents," says this great student of documents, "nothing that lends itself more to deceptive posthumous interpretations."<sup>47</sup> In such contemporary evidence as Sainte-Beuve drew on, he sought the materials not

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<sup>46</sup> PR 5-55.

<sup>47</sup> NL 10-269.



for a picture ingeniously but arbitrarily put together out of shreds and patches, but for a life-sized portrait of the model as it flashes into existence for a moment in passing before the living mirror. The subject has posed in person.

The academic Dryasdust, unlike Sainte-Beuve, usually feels equipped to treat a writer when he has a well indexed set of his works and an up-to-date bibliography that puts him in touch with all that has been written on the subject, including that *selva oscura* of doctoral dissertations in whose labyrinthine recesses the lost facts wander in dreary dis-juncture. To miss even one of these is unscholarly; to miss several is disgraceful; to select the few that seem pertinent, even while graciously acknowledging that there may remain many another as good or even better,

Forest on forest hung about its head,

that is to be a gentleman instead of a scholar, than which there is perhaps in the academic world no greater title to disesteem. Sainte-Beuve, with all his impeccable accuracy and sound learning, felt the puerility of this emptily encyclopædic ideal. He takes a more literary and a more truly human attitude. He does not see the chief or even any very vital element of criticism in a drag-net haul of information, in the mere facts that form the bony skeleton of the figure that he wishes to insufflate with the breath of life. These preliminaries he calls *bagatelles de la porte*—he refuses to lose himself among them and run the risk of not entering the door at all, a mischance to which the scholar is only too exposed. Of facts, enough are for him as good as a feast (not to say better) and, their essence extracted, they may be thrown aside again. The *apparatus criticus* behind his studies, the exploitation of original sources, of unpublished documents, and of dusty authorities, is hidden rather than flaunted. He has the graceful gift of taking his swelling note-book for granted.

Although in his respect for exact truth he repeats that "there is nothing so brutal as a fact," still the ultimate fact was for him spiritual more than material. If it may be got

through knowledge, well and good. If it may be got by finer processes of insight, such as the geometric mind views with blank suspicion, he is nowise averse to thus acquiring it. So delicate are the processes by which he reads a character or a talent that he finds a key to them even in so small a matter as a word: "Every writer has his favorite word, which recurs frequently in his pages and unguardedly betrays in him who employs it a secret desire or a weakness. It has been remarked that Madame de Staël loves to talk of *la vie*, Lamartine of *l'harmonie* and of *les flots*, Hugo of *les géants*. For Senancour this word is *permanence*. It sums up his nature. Elevation in permanence, that is the favorite maxim which dominates and as it were overarches his life."<sup>48</sup> Sainte-Beuve reads de Maistre in the same way. "One of his favorite expressions is *à brûle-pourpoint*. That was the secret of his tactics; that was his trick; he advanced alone against a hostile army, defiance on his lips, and attacked its leader *hand to hand*." No index is for Sainte-Beuve too recondite, too implicated in the depths of personality, to be overlooked; the subtlest or the most evanescent caprices of a dreamy fancy may be replete with meaning, and so may the most seemingly insignificant action. The Hellenist Boissonade, he tells us, was capable of pausing in a conversation, even though it turned on his beloved Greek, to turn round and stare at a passing beauty in the street. "This trait is not a negligible one in his nature; it leaves its trace in many of his learned notes and in the choice of more than one of his subjects for publication."<sup>49</sup> "What I seek in the childhood and youth of Nodier," Sainte-Beuve says, "is less a series of positive facts and unimportant incidents than his emotions and dreams. Now in his case, his recollections, when slightly transformed into romance, render these all the better."<sup>50</sup>

Sainte-Beuve is even willing to see truth in wilful misrepresentations, provided that they convey an impression that is not false. He is ready to defend Chateaubriand's

<sup>48</sup> PC 1-162.

<sup>49</sup> NL 6-103.

<sup>50</sup> PL 1-447.

“Voyage en Amérique” on this score: “In this journal which he does not date, in these forests which he does not name, in navigating this river, unnamed likewise, he is nevertheless profoundly truthful, because he abounds and swims in an overflowing sensation of American nature.”<sup>51</sup>

Sainte-Beuve is even willing (*horresco referens*) to base conclusions on questionable documents! “I will not discuss,” he says, “the question whether these *Réflexions diverses* are really La Rochefoucauld’s or not; it is enough for me that they are attributed to him, that they are worthy of him, and that they express the best taste and the whole spirit of the society in which he lived.”<sup>52</sup> Sainte-Beuve even goes so far as to say that when the critic has in hand the principal and enduring work of an author he may neglect his subsequent career. It would be impossible to reveal more clearly the gulf that separates the true critic from the mere historian of literature.

Although perpetually rescuing from the dust-heap of the past the bits of local color, the significant or witty utterances, the striking incidents, that lend animation to his page, he refuses to romance and to let the poet crowd out the historian. The truth above all—and let poetry come off as it may. Chateaubriand, to quote an example, in dealing with Rancé, the founder of the Trappists, seems more than half inclined to make him a variant of René. He makes Rancé’s service of Venus at least as prominent in the record as his love of God. In Sainte-Beuve’s chapter on Rancé, his youth is reduced to the merest prologue. The tragic death of his mistress, so tempting to the lover of romantic color, is suppressed altogether. In Chateaubriand, we have the whole tragedy; we see the distracted lover plunged in black melancholy, finding night unendurable and passing his days in running through the woods, along the river banks, and on the edges of the pools, calling out the name of her who could not answer him. The greater probity of Sainte-Beuve’s method is indicated in the passage on the precocity of Rancé: “There has been too much talk about

<sup>51</sup> Chat. 1-131.

<sup>52</sup> CL 11-412 (note).



the edition of Anacreon which he made at the age of twelve, with a brief commentary in Greek written by himself. The contrast with the gloomy La Trappe of the future is piquant; but we should not attach more importance to things than they had in real life. Rancé was not one of those who dally very long with trifles."<sup>53</sup> Such uncompromising sobriety inspires confidence—few critics can be so implicitly trusted not to set off their painting with even the most innocent tinge of rose-color.

Yet the real value of criticism lay for Sainte-Beuve in the total coloring given to a literary judgment or impression by the critic's own mind. He recognized that this is founded on the quick intuitions of taste, which requires to be in its turn fed from rich sources of knowledge—of the appropriate kind, the kind that confers initiation, that corrects, deepens and vivifies the critic's faculties, a many-sided yet intimate knowledge akin to the diagnostic scent of the great physician who, instead of being a specialist in the disorders of some specific organ, has a peculiarly keen sense for whatever in a general way distinguishes disease from health. He has a thermometric sensitiveness to the degrees of warmth that favor any particular variety of thought or sentiment. Thus he has brought together life and literature, nature and art, in all their apparently indecipherable complexity of relations, with a sureness of touch and a fineness of discrimination that must be the eternal model, and the eternal despair also, of all future critics. How recurrent, and how illuminating, are passages like this: "It seems to me, barring correction, that in our older society, as it was constituted, the field of friendship was more extensive than it now is: there were more subjects stored up for conversation, more special themes for discussion, even in the way of ideas; publicity had not invaded and deflowered all things as it has to-day; there was far more room for confidence and for secrecy."<sup>54</sup> As Sainte-Beuve says: "Literary criticism has its full value only when it is applied to subjects of which we have for a long time possessed the substance, the ap-

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<sup>53</sup> PR 4-45.

<sup>54</sup> NL 13-454.

purtenances, and the circumstances." That was preeminently true of him. A writer might be new to him, but the substance, the appurtenances, the circumstances, even the spiritual congeners and adversaries involved, were abundantly and intimately familiar to him. The picture fitted into its frame.

A picture, however, it is, and one which owes as much to color as to line. Sainte-Beuve's intelligence has a peculiarly personal tincture, an intellectual fervor which borders on emotion yet rarely renounces its intellectual nature. It operates as knowledge and insight, as criticism in short, even in its most glowing moods. Students of Sainte-Beuve do not usually notice that he is thus in a high degree an emotional critic, and they do not sufficiently indicate how the constant flow of his sensibility imparts to the current of his thought at every turn a freshness and an intimacy of touch that remind us continually that prose and poetry overlap, and that criticism may be actually revivifying as well as constructive, that it may in its more inspired moods be creative in the same way that the poet, independently of his gift of lyrical expression, is antecedently creative in his primary endowment—in his fineness of temper and his intimate vision of things. Sainte-Beuve's poetic turn—so precariously manifested in his verse—flows like a subterranean stream through his work as a secretly fecundating and life-giving influence. He lives in his sensations while writing, his critical meditations slipping in between the beauty coming and the beauty gone; he does not, like most critics, simply report the sensations he had while reading. In his case the effect is vernal, in the other it is at best autumnal. He will never consent, as other critics do, to deal in pallid cerebral abstractions. It is thus that he constantly raises criticism into literature and converts what were else only the substantial commons of our wits into a feast for the heart and the imagination. It requires but a felicitous touch in an author, a noble phrase or an inspired word, to stir this finer mood in him, and the miracle is wrought. He possesses and constantly utilizes "that positive

imagination which we call memory.”<sup>55</sup> Three words of Terence suffice to elicit this highly characteristic page with its rich train of reminiscences and images:

“What touch of nature more ingenuous, more adapted to rouse our sympathy, than this young girl in tears, oblivious of the bystanders, throwing herself upon the bosom of a friend: *flens quam familiariter?* This is one of those words which, once heard, are never forgotten, and which form an unfading picture in the memory. It is like Homer’s words about Andromache, when she lifts up little Astyanax, so terrified yet so soon reassured, to embrace the armed Hector as he goes out to battle: *She laughed amid her tears!* It is like the phrase of Catullus describing the abandoned Ariadne, standing on the sea-shore, with arms outstretched toward the waves that are carrying away the vessel of Theseus, in her immobility like a sculptured Bacchante: *Saxea ut effigies Bacchantis*. It recalls the Trojan women of Virgil, who, on the Sicilian strand, keep looking seaward through their tears: *Pontum adspectabant flentes*. Eternal and living images! For all of us who belong to another age, for those who, like us, have been trained in letters from their childhood and who are rather critics than artists, rather men of books than connoisseurs in marbles and statues, for us these are the figures and the forms we love, wholly poetic and literary ones, which, like the three or four surviving groups of antique statuary, rise up before our eyes each time that we turn toward the past and which adorn the background of our reading and of our memory.”<sup>56</sup>

There is therefore in Sainte-Beuve’s criticism at its best—and no writer is more frequently and more easily at his best—an intensity of life, a harmonious play of the whole concert of faculties operating in unison and at high tension, with a suggestion at the same time of delightful freedom from effort and strain, as though he were born for this special performance. In short, no man of his age shows more palpably the marks of genius absolutely adequate to its task.

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<sup>55</sup> CL 11-8.

<sup>56</sup> NL 5-343.



He had, beyond all other critics, what may be called multiple consciousness, a quickening intelligence that animated the whole body of his knowledge and seemed to be present at all points at the same time. For him a book is a centre from which memory radiates in a hundred different directions, a link in the golden chain of tradition. All that foreshadows it in the past, all that shapes and colors it in the present, every slightest ripple that it makes on the great stream of literature, all this he sees, and renders in his picture. He seems to feel, in every individual pulse-beat, the pressure of that larger life which in a thousand forms at every moment finds its expression and writes its history in the great chronicle of the time-spirit. This intellectual sensitiveness makes him keenly aware of the element of relativity in literature. He traces literature back to its root in social conditions, in prevailing fashions, in changing conventions, to what Taine has called the "moment." "How tastes change!" he exclaims. "How the moving water shifts! How entire branches of literature fade and wither! How the things that yesterday were most cherished and cultivated are to-day perhaps neglected or disdained!"<sup>57</sup> He remarks in regard to a certain translator of Homer, who gave his whole life to the task, that his translation came just fifteen years too late: taste had changed and his merits were no longer marketable.<sup>58</sup> The modern man usually sees in Bossuet the representative of narrow ideas—and such he is—held with harsh intolerance. That is Renan's judgment. Sainte-Beuve is more just in trying to see him with the eyes of a contemporary. "In the social order in which he lived, in that religious and political structure of which he was one of the props, if Bossuet had shown himself tolerant, as we understand the word to-day and as would have befitted Bayle, it could only have been because he was more or less indifferent." We may still with Renan demur a little—but certainly this point of view is approximately that of Bossuet's own time.

<sup>57</sup> NL 5-330.

<sup>58</sup> NL 5-332.

This constant invocation of the Muse of history in Sainte-Beuve's criticism enables him to see the past, not retrospectively, through the gathering mists of time, but with the immediacy of a contemporary. "This is the illusion that I indulge at times when with closed eyes I let the scenes and panoramas of my memory unroll before me: these times that have preceded our birth, this whole eighteenth century, we may, with a little effort and reading, know as intimately as if we had been present in person, and had lived then and not now: Madame d'Epinay, Marmontel, Duclos, and so many others have made us at home there; we might at any hour enter any one of the salons and find ourselves at our ease, and, after remaining silent a few moments to catch the drift of the talk, we might even venture our word without betraying ourselves and without being regarded as strangers."<sup>59</sup> He felt that only in this way could one again experience something of the primal and unalloyed rapture that is felt by those who read in its newness a book that has not yet gathered on itself the dust of time and the servile marks of conventional homage. He did not, like the bibliophile, crave a first edition of the book; he sought a first edition of the spirit with which the book was read. "I cannot get over this weakness, if it be one," he says, "for it seems to me that these tributes, born at the same moment as the book itself and twin with it, make one feel its quality more keenly and refresh our admiration. It is the bubbling of the water drunk at the fountain-head."<sup>60</sup>

His style has a marked unction whenever he speaks of the things of the past which time has spared and consecrated. He dwells with an unforgettable thrill of reminiscent pleasure on any stray remnant of vanishing tradition that he has had the good fortune to gather at first hand from belated representatives of bygone things whom time has suffered to stray into the new age. In their presence he feels—and this is one of the most charming traits of his literary personality—an almost naïve delight; and this delight kindles into a genuine flame of enthusiasm whenever

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<sup>59</sup> CL 11-7.

<sup>60</sup> NL 9-48.

the past comes back to him through the living voice of those who were once a part of it.

This keen sense for what is peculiar to a given moment in the past rendered Sainte-Beuve equally sensitive to what constitutes the individual note or accent of a writer, to that particular intonation which distinguishes his voice, even in a single characteristic utterance, from all other voices. And he distinguishes not less keenly the whole graded gamut of rising or falling notes by which all other writers of the same family are differentiated from the prototype, and echo him each from his respective interval of distance. This puts at the critic's command a host of comparisons and illustrations, of critical distinctions of the most delicately literary order, so that the complex flavor of the artist's work permeates and perfumes the critic's report and exhales from it with a heightened piquancy of charm. The spell of the original is reenforced by these extracted quintessences. When the echo is a perfect counterfeit of the original and when a dead author writes as it were with posthumous hand across the pages of his spiritual heir, how quick Sainte-Beuve is to detect the miracle and to note that the illustrious one being dead yet liveth. How often he thus finds reechoed the note of Fénelon, of Saint François de Sales, of La Bruyère, of Voltaire, or of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre! Every voice that has once held him under its spell lingers undying in his memory.

That means that the critic is a sort of inspired reader, who, while poring over one book, reads a dozen kindred ones in the pages of memory. "To know how to read a book, judging it as you go along, and without ceasing to relish it, that is almost the whole art of the critic. This art consists also in comparing and in choosing rightly the points of comparison: Thus, beside 'Atala' read 'Paul and Virginia' and 'Manon Lescaut'; beside 'Les Martyrs' read the 'Odyssey,' 'Télémaque,' and Milton. Do this, and abandon yourself. Judgment will take shape of its own accord and will grow out of the impression itself."<sup>61</sup> "The art of the

<sup>61</sup> Chat. 1-234.



critic, in a word, in its most practical and common form, consists in knowing how to read books judiciously, and in teaching others to read them in like manner by clearing their pathway and saving them from groping."<sup>62</sup> And Sainte-Beuve adds mischievously that very few people know how to read.

Sainte-Beuve is not content to let the dead past bury its dead embalmed in the cold commemoration of conventional eulogy. He has called the necrologies in question, scanned the obituaries, reread the epitaphs, hung a fresh wreath on many a long-neglected grave, and he has recited in the ear of a momentarily attentive public the shrunken titles and honors that appertained to scores of men and women who had dreamed of fame and who had striven for it too feebly to win it, yet with too much charm or too much eloquence to seem deserving of entire forgetfulness. He has interrupted their oblivion and summoned their pale ghosts to walk again in the light of day. But he has gathered so numerous a band of these defunct spirits, and he introduces us to such a bewildering succession of these inarticulate representatives of semi-greatness, that we run much risk of confusing their identities and, from sheer pressure of ghost on ghost, of seeing their momentarily illumined features flash upon us only to fade again into the darkness out of which they were evoked. One apprehends that all this potent magic will prove impotent against the inexorable decrees of time that spares in each age only a few monumental reputations and, in the end, reduces all the rest to dust and ashes. Revived for a moment, these ineffectual candidates for immortality steal back again one by one to lie embedded as in a second Lethe in the stream of the *Causeries*, whose pages speed past under our flying fingers as we search there for what Sainte-Beuve has to say on the greater spirits over whom time exercises no jurisdiction. Are we likely, even if we consent to spend a half-hour with them in Sainte-Beuve's company, long to remember Fiévée, or Baron Bignon, or Monsieur Frochot, Préfet de la Seine?

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<sup>62</sup> CL 1-278.

And yet, let us not too quickly decide for or against anybody; it is perilous to depart so widely from the spirit of the master—we may overlook some of his most masterly work. He applies his skill as liberally to the smallest as to the greatest figures. We may regret it, but the fact remains. If we skip the study on the Abbé Marolles we shall miss one of the most comical apparitions in this rich gallery of eccentrics, and we shall miss also a series of most irresistibly droll and supremely good-natured pages such as Sainte-Beuve in holiday mood occasionally penned, and, finally, we shall miss an example of that exquisite balance of judgment of which, along with Goethe, he is the great teacher. Marolles was a man whom his own age despised too much even to hand him down to the contempt of posterity. He was at once the most voluminous and the most inept of translators, and, when he had done to death an author in prose, he raked the corpse out of its grave, and assassinated it a second time in verse! The only mercy he showed an ancient, Chapelain asserts, was that accorded by the Cyclops to Ulysses, that of being slaughtered the last. He was too insignificant even for dishonorable mention by Boileau among the bad authors of the day, for Boileau too observed the "barbarous silence" with which the dejected poet reproached his fellows. "Marolles was buried by Chapelain, and Chapelain was in his turn buried by Boileau. Marolles was thus down at the bottom of a second pit, and had, as the physicists say, two or three atmospheres over his head." For all that, Marolles had his good side, he was incredibly industrious, and he made, in the intervals of translating and versifying, two superb and incomparably rich collections of engravings. He also wrote a volume of amiably naïve memoirs. Sainte-Beuve demands nothing more. He exhumes this odd figure from the deep dust of time, and paints all his picturesque and wry grimaces and his laughable weaknesses with a gentle touch: "One is tempted to say to him as to a beggar: 'I would like to do more for you!' But, honestly, one cannot." Sainte-Beuve finds him—and makes him—interesting, not only as a character to be described, but even as a

talent to be analyzed. He draws the final moral: "We must despise no one. Every laborious man has his function and may have his use and his personal distinction. Beside a faculty that deviates and divagates, there may, in the same man, be found another in which he excels and which merits consideration; and the very man who indulges in an easy gibe at faults that strike every eye might reap rich profit by going to school to him for the quality which he possesses."<sup>63</sup> Thus Sainte-Beuve, who teaches us at one moment the benefits of an exquisitely nice taste, teaches us the next moment the uses of an equitable and tolerant one. We shall, no doubt, forget again most of these "unforgettable" portraits of worthies whom we shall never more meet on the highways of literature, which the originals merely crossed but did not travel,—but may the lesson remain! And the sprig of rosemary, carried away for remembrance from these neglected graves so freshly called up before our vision, will serve at any rate to recall the place and the hour. Sainte-Beuve, alluding to a study of that gayest of all the gay butterflies of a now long vanished period, the comédienne Déjazet, says: "But do I not hear some sage protesting: What is the justification for portraying Mlle. Déjazet? This man, who fancies himself wise and who makes this objection, is not wise. There is reason for painting, in any age, all that has lived, and shone, and blossomed in its season; only make sure you capture the color of the subject and its luminous glow."<sup>64</sup>

Thus, if even the limner's skill cannot make us remember the lesser and the least of the personages he portrays, it creates in us what is far more significant than themselves, an indelible impression, vividly colored and delicately shaded, of the hour and the atmosphere in which they lived. If they only flit across the stage and vanish again, we can ourselves linger there in more leisurely fashion and with almost the illusion of reality.

Sainte-Beuve, after one of these brief excursions, says: "It was only the merest nothing, this literary point that I

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<sup>63</sup> CL 14-147.

<sup>64</sup> CL 5-39.



have evoked here. Yet I could not bring myself to let it escape. In turning at random the leaves of some forgotten little duodecimos, a stray sunbeam seemed to illumine and to outline in its integrity this train of sparkles in the dusty air; had I not seized it on the instant, I should no doubt have never seen it more. We vanish so quickly ourselves, we are ourselves such fugitive apparitions! It is a delight to understand whatever has lived."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> PF 381.

## XI

### SAINTE-BEUVE AND ROMANTICISM

Let us seek to understand all forms, without confounding them and without sacrificing one to the other.

—*Sainte-Beuve*

The Frenchman, a great master but unhappily also a frequent victim of logic, is never satisfied until he has disposed of a given phenomenon, no matter how complex, by attaching to it a label that assigns it to some fixed class. The young Sainte-Beuve is labelled *romantic*. The mature Sainte-Beuve is labelled *classic*. In reality, the matter is not quite so simple. The secret of Sainte-Beuve's broad outlook and of his catholic sympathies lay in his freedom from all narrowing and theoretic exclusions, in his openness to the appeal of the most varied inspirations, in the exquisite balance, rare in a Frenchman, that he maintained between nature and culture. In the narrow French sense, he is neither classic nor romantic.

The French classic school stood too much aloof from nature and had too little sense of the mysterious fountain-head of power within the individual from which genius draws its primary substance and its indelible character,

Wild nature's vigor working at the root.

The great writers of the golden age had a profound sense of order, and of all that it can superadd of lucidity, of fineness, and even of force, to the spontaneous power of native talent; but they tended too readily to confound talent itself with the discipline which purifies and directs it. They laid so much stress on what genius may acquire that they slighted that chief wealth of all which it brings with it as its birthright. It lost something of its fresh color and of its primal vigor by protracted sitting on the benches of the school. Created in the image of God, it tried to recreate

itself in the image of Boileau. The masters multiplied precept and over-emphasized the model and the pattern till art grew tongue-tied by authority. They tended to impose the general wit as law and to curtail the individual wit. They sang in chorus with wonderful refinement, keeping exquisite time, but abandoning the dangerous high notes to Philomel on her green branch. It was a splendid concert in which a relative perfection was achieved, but with a certain sacrifice of originality, which found itself questioned and hampered, timidly ruled and over-ruled. Sainte-Beuve admits that, with three or four exceptions, the taste of the great seventeenth century writers was timorous.<sup>1</sup>

The French romanticists, on the contrary, if they had a keener sense of the value of the spontaneous element in genius, failed to understand its nature. They found it almost sufficient in itself. They accepted a quantum, though grudgingly inadequate, of discipline in form; the content of literature remained for them absolutely free and instinctive. The self, which they confounded with genius, was for them sacred, and must suffer no pruning or training. This brought them into violent conflict with taste, with morals, and only too often with common-sense. An unpurged crudity passed for freshness, whim for originality, and untutored audacity for heaven-sent inspiration. The private wit superseded the general wit; individualism ran mad; every proser offered to recreate the universe on a new plan; every poet, raving at random in his own private Bedlam and ringing melodious changes on the old threadbare themes, in language and images often of rare beauty and fascinating newness, proclaimed his naïve rediscovery of the sensuous world or his untimely irruption into the world of thought. He was really at home—and far too much so—in the world of passion, of passion more than of feeling, of feeling more than of spirituality. Yet he obliterated the distinction between God and nature and laid claim to a strain of the divine in his inspiration. The romanticists fancied that they had discovered the vast continent of the

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<sup>1</sup> Olivier 300.



soul, when in reality they had discovered only the tropical West Indies of passion. When they waxed less presumptuous and when their passion was spent, the universe usually lapsed for them into a show-house or a picture-gallery; they fell into sheer picturesqueness, and substance dwindled into imagery. "But Théo!" the readers of Gautier's volume on Spain exclaimed, "are there no Spaniards in Spain?"

Romanticism is art addressed to the senses; classicism addresses the intellect behind the senses. The prime defect of the classicism of the age of Louis XIV is that it forgets that the senses will refuse to carry a message in which they have no interest; the prime defect of the romanticism of 1830 is that it takes the senses for its sufficient audience and says little or nothing that can interest the intelligence. In the one case nature was half suppressed, in the other she was half degraded. True classicism does not renounce the warm contact with reality nor all the manifold beauty that adorns its pathway to its final goal; and true romanticism is a reverent return to the august mother, a naïve hymn to youth, an exquisite flowering of the senses amid the festival and music of life in its springtime, without self-conscious falsity and violence. The French classicist roams in the waving wheat-field, so full of substantial nourishment for humanity, and stoops to pluck up the usurping poppies that invade it; the French romanticist sings an ecstatic ode to the poppies with a refrain in which he curses the wheat-stalks that hide their beauty. The truly classic poet, who has been baptized in Hellenism, sings a strophe to Ceres, goddess of the life-giving soil, and an antistrophe to Flora, who

Touches the stubble plains with rosy hue.

In modern literature the union of these so widely different qualities has almost never been achieved with the antique symmetry. The youthful beauty and freshness which are the core of genuine romanticism have had a distressful trick of getting themselves lodged in the most fragile and erratic spirits, and the puzzling modern problem of get-

ting a sane spirit of romantic feeling into a sane body of classic form has not yet been satisfactorily solved.

Yet if that rare union be not in essence achieved, it is not alone the romanticist who is unsatisfactory, the classicist is not less so: the one has missed the civilizing grace, the other has missed the charm of nature. The one is too wild, the other is too tame. The popular modern error has been to associate the classic with tameness, with theory, with study, with rules and restrictions. It has been located not in the temperate but in the frigid zone. It has been defined solely by its differences from romanticism. The large territory which they hold in common has been ignored, as if feeling and fancy had both been invented in the days of the French Revolution. The clear vision of classic art has been mistaken for cold vision. That is because by the classicist the battle of the passions is carried on with smokeless powder. He sees what he feels, and he sees whither his feelings tend. He accomplishes the miracle, more possible in literature than in life, of being intellectually cool while emotionally heated. His feelings are not therefore less intense; they are simply less disorderly than are those of the romanticist, whose head is sometimes even more the seat of excitement than his heart—because, unlike Ajax, he prefers to fight in the dark, where the gleam of passion has a spurious magnificence that is exaggerated tenfold by the cloud of smoke that invests it only to blind as well as dazzle the spectator. The classic temper is as familiar with passion as the romantic, and with the same passions—it is even more familiar with them, because it has paused to observe them in others as well as in itself. That is why the detached, impersonal, and classic artist, like Shakespeare or Molière, can create a whole world, while the typically romantic genius, like Byron or Chateaubriand, can only repeat himself in enlarging echoes.

Classicism is perhaps best conceived as a balance between the universal and the individual elements in man, as an imposition of rational limits on the play of his imaginative and emotional self. That means that it is the litera-

ture of maturity. This ideal the ancients achieved in life less successfully than some of the modern peoples, who have shown more moral sanity and more political sense—possibly because we have drained off our best wit more fully in these directions than the Greeks at least did, abandoning literature to our second-rate great men, the men in whom gifts of imagination and feeling are not accompanied by any corresponding greatness of intelligence.

We are, in our mode of feeling, predominantly romantic: we aspire to eternal youth, because we prize above all else the gifts that nature bestows on youth, freshness, vigor, and the intoxication of the senses. We refuse to grow old, that is to grow up. The Attic poets impress one as supremely intelligent; our modern poets as a rule impress us only by their poetical powers. The winnowing of time has no doubt contributed to set off the ancients to advantage; but the difference is not thus to be explained away. The problem of balance was unquestionably an easier because a simpler one. Our complicated and myriad-minded culture confuses as much as it enriches the intellect. As for our feelings, the long conflict of the natural man with an uncompromising religion has not only intensified our nature, it has divided it by establishing new storm-centres alongside of those which nature itself creates. Christianity has brought man into more vital contact with the infinite, and has deepened, softened, sometimes also antagonized, feelings that were of old less accentuated and less rebellious. In the same way, the universe of nature in which man is imbedded speaks to him more stirringly and more bewilderingly than to his remote forefathers. It overwhelms him by its vastness, its mystery, and its horror, which only grow upon him as he catalogues it. I will not say that what was a squad has swelled to an army; that would be to understate the fecundity of nature, which has in all ages and conditions a chaotic richness, as well as rankness, of growth, making order always a precarious and hard-won triumph; but in our day balance is palpably harder to achieve. It is achieved, like all virtue, by renunciation, and the sacrifices



it demands in the area of imagination and feeling are immense; even in the domain of the intellect they are considerable and painful after so many centuries of unrestricted curiosity. We see so much more analytically and at so near a focus the things of the intellect that they no longer have the imposing simplicity that they had for the ancients; we see them with a mingling of that scepticism which a completer knowledge of their complexity fosters. The modern mind, thanks to its devouring curiosity, has acquired a certain trepidation, and hangs over its problems like a gambler over the gaming-table. Our imagination, too, has lost its old simplicity. It has stored up an inordinate wealth of images, ever more resplendent and more salient, that come trooping at its beck and call from a world whose walls have been leveled on every side of us and which we have spent a couple of thousand years in exploring and appropriating. At the same time our emotional natures have proportionately deepened the time-worn channels in which they run, and they carry in their currents golden sands from a hundred tributaries whose existence was undreamed of on the banks of the Ilissus and the Tiber.

The ancients, an enemy would say, owed something of their objectivity to a certain immaturity, to a habit of conceiving mankind so largely as types that they neglected the individual, and thus escaped the morbidity that self-love usually generates from protracted and intense preoccupation with self. On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that the modern has been betrayed into excess. His religion, his philosophy, his ethics, and his art likewise, have all taken on a personal stamp—and the artist who would be truly representative must in some measure make his peace with the romantic spirit: he must compromise. He must placate nature by including in his scheme of things all that is natural and durable in the pack of novelties with which time has enriched and encumbered us, chief among them an enlarged personality. To admire and enjoy this has been for some centuries past the too exclusive concern of the artist. The central motive of all Sainte-Beuve's criticism

was to understand it. And this led him to pick and choose in it. It is the implied renunciation that finds us refractory. It is harder than ever to merge ourselves in the universal and to consent to be only humanly typical. Anonymity, when real, is, according to Sainte-Beuve, fatal to the passion for authorship: "What may be called the flowering of literary impulse, in order to achieve its full splendor, really demands that an external radiance, at least indirect, shall fall upon it, that a breeze from without shall stimulate and refresh it."<sup>2</sup> Unphilosophical as it may be, those purer elements in man's nature by which he rises above himself into the universal also crave the same external stimulation and refreshment. Even the saint, intent on dying to himself, is not loath to gather his friends at the death-bed. Man wishes to stamp some impress of his own personality on every one of his works, to make them in some measure instruments of self-expression. He insists on reconciling this even with the sternest gospel of objectivity. Thus thought, fancy, and feeling, all suffer a boundless dispersion. Compression within the limits of a harmonious wholeness seems jejune and summary, a mutilation of nature. The symmetry thus won seems to us artificial like that imposed on nature by the Versailles gardeners, who lopped off all irregular and exuberant growth as so much culpable redundancy; we are reminded of Madame de Maintenon, who sacrificed to a frown of Louis XIV the screen that sheltered her from icy draughts in her vast apartment at Versailles—because it interfered with architectural decorum, so there was nothing for it but to "perish symmetrically."<sup>3</sup> The individual detail has gained so much in brilliance and intensity that modern art is ever more reluctant to discard or reduce it for the sake of the general effect. It prefers Shakespeare's wealth to Sophocles' perfection, and it queries whether the sacrifice of this perfection is not in great part the very condition of this richness. Yet it also confusedly feels that da Vinci was right in regretting the antique symmetry. Rational balance in art is what the spirit ultimately

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<sup>2</sup> PR 2-86.<sup>3</sup> NL 7-192.

craves, the adequate expression of the whole man rather than a supremely brilliant expression of certain sides of his nature—though we are indeed only too readily reconciled to the lack of wholeness in a writer provided he convincingly prove himself a man of parts.

But while theory itself thus stands lost in hesitation, practice impotently moves along the line of least resistance. The circle of thought and sensation having so vastly increased, the modern tends more and more to confine himself to the special segment of it that corresponds to his special endowment, to live fragmentarily in his mind or his mood, to renounce complete vision for intense vision. Theory demands a philosophic poet and a poetic philosopher; practice gives us poets who are not philosophic and philosophers who are not poetic. The critical intelligence tends toward a drily unimaginative manner, as exemplified in the typical modern historian or scientist or speculative writer. The creative spirit tends to be dominantly imaginative and sentimental and to revel in its inner riches, unhampered by external proprieties. In the one case analysis is pushed to excess, and the final mystery of things, in which resides so much of their spell and their charm, is minimized or ignored. We approach them externally and see them materially, in endless detail but never in their wholeness, because the universal human element eludes the pure formalist. In the other case we tend to the contrary excess: the artist is not completely and exquisitely human, but only an imagist and a sentimentalist living in his own personal sensations and ignoring his relation to the world around him. He translates life into pure poetry and abides at his peril in a maze of illusions where reality is minimized or ignored. The universal human element, the truth of things, eludes the dreamer.

These are tendencies—not fatalities. In proportion to his wisdom and his will, man strives to see things in their relations, to achieve wholeness. He is, at bottom, unwilling to follow Schlegel and worship fragmentariness as a new form of art. For the modern, who is fated to find both



the effort and the sacrifice involved in the effort so increasingly great, it is hardly possible again to achieve the antique symmetry in its pristine fullness. Modern art is not, let us hope, doomed to remain chaotic, but it will doubtless be of a more rich and also of a more confusing complexity. The underlying unity, when present, as in the greatest work it still is, will be more hidden and more involved than of old, it will be more a matter of essence and less of form. We shall have to disengage it from a greater entanglement of detail and to read it with a more divining eye. One therefore, like Sainte-Beuve, who is too deeply imbued with tradition to undervalue the past, and at the same time too modern to scorn innovation, will seek a truce between the ancients and the moderns and will renounce the inept quarrel with antiquity that the age has so fiercely carried on. Such complication is doubtless more conceivable as an ideal than clearly feasible as an achievement—that is the price we pay for inheriting, even *sous bénéfice d'inventaire*, the cumulative wealth of time. But in order to learn to be soundly modern, we can as yet not do better, however paradoxical it may seem to the uninitiated, than to turn for masters and models to those very ancients against whom we are trying to assert our originality. So long as we continue, as at present, to cherish our confusion even more than our riches, we shall continue to produce works that will remind men of taste of these bygone masters chiefly by the shock of their inferiority. That is the inevitable penalty paid by those who say with Carl Sandburg:

I speak of new cities and new people,  
I tell you the past is a bucket of ashes.

Sainte-Beuve felt keenly the neglect of form to which the romantic love of ornament and color had led: "For a long time past the detail has triumphed, we embroider it, we amplify it, we carry it to excess, and we believe ourselves very grand thanks to these riches heaped upon one another. We are wrong! Truly beautiful art does not comport itself thus; it does not calculate in this fashion; its secret is a more inward one. Its treasure is not composed

of innumerable and splendid details added together and forming a mass; in truth, such treasures are a little too much like those of the barbaric kings." And here the critic goes on to extol the calmer and more restrained beauty of such classic masters as Racine: "This is an invisible and spiritual sort of beauty, unknown to those talents who exhibit all their wealth openly: even though this ostentatious wealth should be the finest and richest in the world, there subsists always between this last manner and the other very much the same difference as between the idolatrous pagan world or, if you prefer, the most efflorescent pantheism, and the orderly world as it exists for a Plato or a Fénelon, for those who believe in a specific creation, and who set up man as sovereign and supreme king at the head of his kind and (allowing for some human illusion) at the centre of the sphere and of the resplendent firmament."<sup>4</sup> That is the tone of the true classicist, of one who judges a work of art primarily by its general effect, by the presence of a guiding purpose. Yet, when Sainte-Beuve, in his more enthusiastic moods, turns from a typical classic like Racine to a typical romanticist like Hugo or Lamartine, he is capable, despite their lack of form and purpose, of extolling them in terms that might almost satisfy their most fervent admirers.

Similarly, he is ready to waive the exigencies of a classic taste and to accept with acquiescent delight the capriciously personal style of Montaigne, all constellated with figures and overrun with color and naïvely oblivious of every precept of severe form. "One of the prime causes of Montaigne's success, and indeed its essential and supreme condition, without which all the rest would count for nothing, the medium of his charm and his real talisman, is his style. Style, when possessed as fully as Montaigne possesses it, becomes for posterity a dispenser of plenary indulgences. Much is pardoned by the after-world to those who have genuinely painted. The irregularities of the plan and of the ideas, the licenses and the familiar or dwindling notes,

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<sup>4</sup> PR 6-117, 118.

everything takes on color and is embellished with flattering tints that seduce the eye and provoke ever-renewed eulogies. Style is the golden sceptre that holds in fee the kingship of this world . . . Any one of his pages seems the most fertile and madly luxuriant meadow . . . He had no notion of wholeness, no turn for creating a vast design; and what is the use of so much strenuous and of so much fatiguing labor? Invention of detail and a genius for expression made up with him for all the rest . . . Pascal, who in his own style indulges in so little play and who always remains the master, has not enough taken this into account."<sup>5</sup> That is, for the time being, the tone of the romanticist. It is evident that Sainte-Beuve was profoundly sensitive to the charm of either classic or romantic inspiration, and that the magic of genius counted more with him than did principles and standards even the most rational and irrefragable.

He accepts as final neither the classic over-refinement nor the romantic wildness. He seeks a middle ground. He stands at first very near the romanticists, among them rather than of them for the most part, through constraint of temperament and under protest of taste; later he takes his stand visibly nearer to the classicists, so near as to seem in turn almost identified with them. It is the story of Goethe young and of Goethe mature, reënacted on French soil. Sainte-Beuve, in truth, never wholly renounced the romantic impulse so evident in his early work. He loved always that very considerable part of romanticism which embodies a legitimate return to nature. He accepted what was vital and durable in the romantic revolution, but looked askance at the ambition to narrow down the stream of tendency into a school, to oppose creed to creed and formula to formula and to checkmate the classic affirmations by romantic negations. He abjured only so much of romanticism as seemed to him incompatible with a truly classic taste. He retained only so much of the classic ideal as seemed to him compatible with truly sound and cultivated romantic feeling.

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<sup>5</sup> PR 2-442.



When people spoke of him as a convert to classicism, he disclaimed the title: "I felt that I had been very little consulted by those who praised me thus absolutely for a conversion which was not so complete as they supposed."<sup>6</sup> He is a "*demi-converti*." He deemed it possible to be romantic without strain and violence, and to be classic without coldness and stiffness. He found the best examples of this felicitous fusion of qualities, which more pedantic critics had esteemed mutually exclusive, in the great ancients, from Homer to Theocritus. It is characteristic that in the seventeenth century the two writers that he seems to have read most and who seem to be nearest to his familiar affections are not the very greatest but the transitional ones, La Bruyère and Fénelon. Above all, he refused to harden into formalism. He was never prone to restrict theoretically the expansion of genius. Literature, "in its charming variety and its perpetual novelty," was for him in its nature too aerial and Protean a thing to be confined in any preconceived system. He was—as the critical spirit so rarely is—in the highest degree friendly to innovation: he believed that the laws of art are not fixed abstractions, but, within the limits of approved taste, are variable deductions experimentally derived from the revelations of possibility which genius itself accredits by the constantly widening circle of its performances. The novel of his day, for example, that *parvenu* in literature, so puffed up with self-importance, so arrogantly and often so infelicitously expansive that it seemed in danger of bursting and of perishing from sheer formlessness, does not provoke his hostility. Yet he is not less sensitive than others to all that there is of hazardous and clumsy experimentation in the romantic, the historic, the social, and the philosophical fiction that reflected so faithfully the chaos of the age.

The straining after originality, so characteristic of nineteenth century literature, he saw to be usually a signal proof of the lack of it. The romanticists sought to be original by doing the reverse of what their predecessors had

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<sup>6</sup> CL 14-75.

done. They overlooked the obvious fact that everything that is known and familiar carries with it the suggestion of its opposite—so that the latter is not really unknown and unfamiliar. That is why those in quest of novelty and strangeness cannot achieve them by simply reversing the received order of things and making them stand on their heads. That is merely a grotesque affront to reason. Originality consists in seeing the known and the familiar rationally, as others see them, but with such intensity as to give them a profounder and therefore a strange and novel significance. Musset is original, Baudelaire is only queer. Sainte-Beuve gained much ill-will by resolving a great part of contemporary originality into mere queerness. Yet he is for freedom: "Let us not restrict the field of the novel; let us not narrowly theorize about it; let us not organize it. Let every novelist have his own ideas and be welcome. Only do not let these expositions and defenses deprive us of a single good novel that the author might have written in the meantime. The best justification for the artist is to continue producing, to push on and to keep going."\*

Sainte-Beuve is classic in temper more than in theory. He is in his day—we may except pure reactionaries, like Nisard—the one outstanding heritor of the traditional taste, though he applies it with unexampled elasticity. This temper manifests itself in his love for moderation in all things—so much so that his taste seemed timid to most of his contemporaries. His craving was for subdued tints, for *justesse* rather than for telling effect, though the romantic rhetoric, when its flamboyant colors were not too palpably false, often stirred him to profound admiration. But quieter effects pleased him better and held him more permanently. One of the most striking characteristics of the romanticists was the sharp relief into which they threw nature: they saw it at too near a focus, without enough atmosphere intervening to soften the asperities. Sainte-Beuve complains of the shattering sensation to the eye and

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\* What is even more remarkable in a Frenchman of the age of Taine and Flaubert, Sainte-Beuve was willing to tolerate, *mirabile dictu*, what nowadays we should call the intrusion of morality into the novel. He says: "A little sermonizing is not out of place, that is granted; it is only a question of observing good taste." NL 5-25.

the brain due to the frequent clash of color and the violent jolting. Later he denounced a variant of the same procedure among the realists. He praises Eugénie de Guérin for escaping this fault: "She feared excess; she does not stress or strain; she had taste."<sup>7</sup> In that sentence we have the whole of Sainte-Beuve, one is tempted to say. But the Proteus is not so easy to bind. The preceding sentence runs: "One might wish her description to have a little more novelty, a little more relief." In this way Sainte-Beuve tempers everything by its opposite, holding out one hand to his beloved ancients, and the other, sometimes a little coyly, to the moderns, the innovators, the romanticists.

In 1862 he says of a critic who had long posed as an enemy of the romantic painters: "I am in reality dealing with an adversary. M. Delécluze, as a critic of art, has never ceased to combat, to mock, to belittle, or to disparage this movement which I love, of which I hold it an honor, unworthy though I am, to be a part, to which belonged all my early friends, all those whom I admired in my youth, to which belong still all those among them who survive. He has steadily refused to see that what he terms the romantic tempest had great and legitimate reasons for being; that after 1816, after 1819, a universal and reviving breath had passed over our souls, that a flame had touched our lips and our brushes; that there was in all the splendid innovation and in all the experimentation of that day, in art, in poetry, in philosophy, in history, in criticism, that there was in all the sister arts, an affinity, a natural and fraternal sympathy, a rapid electric current, the true mark of all necessary and legitimate renovations."<sup>8</sup> Such language implies not only full recognition but even ungrudging acceptance of all that there was of renovating power, of liberating impulse, of brilliant revival of the life of the senses and the feelings, in the new movement. Sainte-Beuve, in looking back on the period of his romantic enthusiasm, when he forgets the exasperation caused by the faults and the failures of his idols, constantly renews this homage to the romantic

<sup>7</sup> NL 9-277.

<sup>8</sup> NL 3-97.



spirit and reverts with undiminished zest to "that interval of happy and brilliant fantasy, of free imagination, when he had wandered in the gardens of Alcinous."<sup>9</sup>

In truth, he even has along with the romantic impulse a decided touch of the moral relaxation of mood that so commonly goes with it. His point of view is not always masculine enough to be soundly classic, even in his classic moods. This weak spot in his armor appears especially in his dealings with women. He is apt to appear a little too much a woman himself. This helps marvelously toward understanding them, but it is a hindrance in judging them—especially when they are so exclusively women as to lack certain complementary masculine virtues. Sainte-Beuve after describing the Bohemian eighteenth century society in which and on whose level Mademoiselle de Lespinasse moved, calls her a *noble cœur*.<sup>10</sup> Matthew Arnold, speaking of the Godwin coterie, of Miss Clairmont and of her relations with Shelley and Byron, exclaims: "What a set!" Yet the world of Miss Clairmont and that of Mademoiselle de Lespinasse are very much on a par; it is hard to find any difference in their moral standards. Still Sainte-Beuve, who on occasion judges so severely the men who lack the manly virtues, men like the libertine poets of the eighteenth century,<sup>11</sup> is romantically unwilling to see the sordid strain in the character of his heroine, who lacked probity in friendship, uprightness in love, good sense in conduct, and restraint in passion. He paints her romantically, but he refuses to judge her morally. Sainte-Beuve shares somewhat the romantic conception of woman, and that conception is ultimately, under all its flowery adornments, Oriental and degrading. "Has the intelligence of a woman, however great, ever checked her heart?"<sup>12</sup> he asks. And he answers his question by quoting La Rochefoucauld: "The intelligence of most women serves rather to fortify their folly than their reason." What wonder if he concludes that when love's delicious poison has once been deeply drunk, there is

<sup>9</sup> Corr. 2-48.

<sup>10</sup> CL 2-140

<sup>11</sup> Cf. CL 1-470-472

<sup>12</sup> CL 2-137.

no cure! One has only to recall to mind such classic heroines as the Antigone or Electra of Sophocles, the Chimène or Pauline of Corneille, to realize that we have been plunged for a moment in the full current of romanticism.

We still find ourselves there in Sainte-Beuve's company at times when he deals with the problem of art and morals and speaks of the background of experience on which genius draws. In reality all experience is food for genius. But its chemistry has strange secrets for the transmutation of elements, and can economize and sometimes even suppress the use of the less desirable or the more depressing kinds. The romanticist, that eloquent advocate of the imaginative as opposed to the intellectual faculty, is inclined a little to underestimate the creative power of the imagination, its inexplicable art of creating something as it were out of nothing, without homage to methods, sources, and recipes. Sainte-Beuve says: "In default of physical derangements, it is the pangs of the spirit that are a condition of lofty thought, of profound sentiment, and of genius. If one sings at all, it is because one has wept. The bleeding fibres of the heart were the first strings of the lyre; they will be the last. It was because the statue of Memnon was broken that it became vocal with the dawn."<sup>13</sup> That is Sainte-Beuve at the age of thirty-three. Let us hear him some thirty years later: "Talent is like the apple-tree; the poet in order to achieve his full fruitage must have received a wound at the very roots of life. Organizations that have too happy a strain are apt to run wholly to wood and foliage."<sup>14</sup> Evidently the romantic vein in Sainte-Beuve never quite dried up. How far does experience countenance such a one-sided theory? How explain thus Corneille writing the "Cid," or Racine writing "Andromaque," or La Fontaine his "Fables," or Milton his "Comus"? And where is there any trace either of wound or of woodenness in Theocritus, or Ariosto, or Rabelais? Must genius shun the normal life, shun what Sainte-Beuve calls "conjugal and domestic plenitude and beatitude" as hostile to inspiration? No—genius, if it will, may be

<sup>13</sup> PC 2-5.

<sup>14</sup> NL 12-245.

cheerful without compunction—it may survive threatened extinction even though it dwell amid smiling fancies and joyous exultations.

Sainte-Beuve's conception of poetry remains always tinged, not to say deeply dyed, with romantic colors. It is evidently a former companion in arms of Hugo and a belated devotee of Lamartine who writes, in 1862, of "those vast and somewhat vague regions, those intermediary spaces, the abode of the winds, of the sunbeams and of the clouds, the atmosphere, in a word, in which poetry freely breathes and disports."<sup>15</sup> Arnold is nearer the truth when he says of Shelley: "Those who extol him as the poet of clouds, the poet of sunsets, are only saying that he did not, in fact, lay hold of the poet's right subject-matter."

Sainte-Beuve even pushes the demand for freedom of inspiration so far as to sanction the romantic irresponsibility which the younger generation in literature is in every age so fond of arrogating, as if self-expression were the sole end as it is the usual source of the literary impulse. This confusion Sainte-Beuve, in his laudable fear lest he obstruct or falsify nature, too readily falls into—not observing that he is thus subscribing to the common superstition that nature, so energetic yet so blind, can beget from its power of inspiration that also of intelligent direction:

"Every man who is born for letters loves letters for their own sake above all else; he loves them for himself, according to the capricious lure of his chimera. *Quem tu, Melpomene, semel*. He abandons the crowd, if it displeases him, and goes off to consume his fairest years in remote bypaths. The subjects that he affects, and to which his talent most ardently turns, are not suggested to him from without as an echo of public opinion; they come from some fibre of his heart, or he asks them only from the echoes of the woods. He has fascinations and strange ravishments such as matter-of-fact spirits, intent only on substantial returns, find incomprehensible and can only smile at with pity. But patience! All this will some day achieve form and meaning.

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<sup>15</sup> NL 3-118.



Talent imprints on this random matter the interest that it at first lacks; it creates it for those who follow after. What had not as yet existed will date from that day, and the élite of humanity will relish its peculiar charm."<sup>16</sup>

Yet Sainte-Beuve is in reality far more inclined to the doctrine which opposes and corrects this apotheosis of the individual sense. We have seen how near he comes to conceding the irresponsibility of genius. Let us in turn hear what he says of the responsibility of genius: "Every man endowed with great faculties, and living at a time when they have an opening for revealing themselves, is responsible before his century and before humanity for the production of a work in harmony with the general needs of the age and tributary to the march of progress. Whatever may be his individual tastes, his caprices, his indolence of temper, or his wayward fancies, he owes to society a public monument, under penalty of casting off his mission and wantonly shirking his destiny."<sup>17</sup> This Sainte-Beuve calls "the sacred law of genius." As so often with him, we have heard the sound of two different bells. When we reflect on the solid majesty of his own monument, we can guess which one he listened to most devoutly and which one is for us the more authoritative. The belief that genius enjoys the godlike privilege of knowing everything while learning nothing could not long seduce his keen common-sense. "It is given to genius to foresee and to divine many things," he says, "yet there is nothing like seeing and observing likewise." That touches on a weakness of all Sainte-Beuve's self-centred and oracular allies in the romantic camp. It shows why he was bound inevitably to drift far away from them and from their theories. "I was the only one among them who possessed the critical sense," he says. This critical sense is however by no means relentless; it bears a countenance more in sorrow than in anger.

For one so profoundly sensitive to the particular spirit of each successive age, and to what there is of legitimacy in its demand to give expression to its special modes of

<sup>16</sup> PL 1-486.

<sup>17</sup> PL 1-251.

thought and feeling, to those phases of which this one unique moment and no other in the tide of time is the predestined and responsible representative, for such a one the phenomenon known as the romantic spirit was not a thing to be judged only by its faults of inexperience, by its errors, by its exaggerations, by its insolent rejections, and by its mad precipitancy of affirmation, in a word by its feverish and sickly sides. To class it with epilepsy or with insanity, as the pseudo-classic critic did (not without provocation, it must be admitted), was to fail in the very thing which Sainte-Beuve regarded as the most fundamental condition of sound and useful criticism, namely that the critic should be in intimate contact with the age he lives in.

He therefore must not be hastily set down as hostile to romanticism because he shows such profound dissatisfaction with most of his romantic contemporaries, in whom the virtues of the movement were so seriously compromised by faults perhaps not inherent in it. The man of letters in him, who had hailed the new dawn with so much enthusiasm that he had for a time staked his critical fortunes on its success, had been cruelly disillusioned. He had hoped for an Augustan age, such as might balance that of Louis XIV and recall the glorious epochs of Greece and Rome. It was among the poets especially that he had hoped to see this new era:

*Magnus ab integro sæclorum nascitur ordo.*

It was not envy at the success of these poets, it was, on the contrary, grief at their failure, that cooled his ardor. He too might have said of his abandoned idol:

*Ah! je l'ai trop aimé pour le point haïr,*

which, properly interpreted, means that with all its faults he loved it still. "Suppose it non-existent and, in the presence of Europe, what a lacuna!"<sup>18</sup> he exclaims. "French poetry," he says, "has above all else been the favorite object of my thoughts, and its regeneration has never for an

<sup>18</sup> CL 14-78.

instant ceased to be my study."<sup>19</sup> But he is constrained to acknowledge that "the age, in spite of the brilliancy of its early promise, does not appear destined to rank among the great eras or centuries that outshine all rivals, that are venerated from afar, and are summed up in a great name."<sup>20</sup> Its finest talents lack discipline, unity of effort and of development; they have suffered a barbaric dispersion far from the serene temples of art and of beauty. He writes of the great romantic decade: "In France, during these ten years, every genuine literary tradition has been broken off; those who might have served as masters and have established a following have passed into politics and affairs.

"The University and the Normal School produce erudite scholars and very estimable literary dullards after the German model; there has risen no purely literary talent for ten years. Those who possess a little of the light and playful graces abandon themselves to facile production and to journalism, and, finding no rallying point, are soon spoiled." Even the superb torrent of originality let loose by Hugo in the works of his exile did not dazzle Sainte-Beuve into acquiescent acceptance, as it does most critics. He sagaciously remarks that "an exile, even though pedestalled on a rock, is hampered by the cutting off of the bonds of understanding between himself and the age."<sup>21</sup> "How much better it would have been for our great modern French poets if they had concerned themselves, like Racine and like Virgil, with those humble labors in which lies the secret of diction, labors which might have rendered them perfect poets and have eternized the honor of their works, instead of seeking, as they have done, to embrace and dominate the world!"<sup>22</sup> Sainte-Beuve says of that break-neck iconoclast Granier de Cassagnac: "He is violent, and he does not possess the tradition of the things whereof he speaks." He might have said, and he inwardly thought, as much of almost all his early contemporaries. If he did not, in dealing with them, so openly express his thought, he at any rate took always

<sup>19</sup> PC 5-411.

<sup>20</sup> PC 5-332.

<sup>21</sup> Corr. 2-51.

<sup>22</sup> PR 6-152.



a multitude of delicate precautions in order that he might not end by saying of them what he said of the gladiatorial Granier: "To have spoken of him with too much politeness is one of the minor remorsees of my literary life."<sup>23</sup>

The romantic writers increasingly offended the good sense of Sainte-Beuve by their arrogant individualism, by their superb satisfaction with themselves, by their refusal to study the book of the world. The seventeenth century writers had modestly concerned themselves with the scrutiny of universal man—a study which inevitably leads to wisdom. The nineteenth century poets were proudly concerned with the admiring inspection of themselves—a study which inevitably leads away from wisdom. La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyère were students of human nature and arrived at some large general truths. Chateaubriand and his literary progeny spent their lives in throwing a halo around their weakness and vices, and ended by creating new and dangerously seductive idols. They inoculated the age with their own malady. They were not moralists but demoralisers. "The greater number of these poets," says Sainte-Beuve, "have abandoned themselves, uncontrolled and unbridled, to all the instincts of their nature and also to all the exigencies of their pride or even to all the silly caprices of their vanity. Their faults and their qualities have found vent together in unstinted license, and posterity will have to discriminate between them."<sup>24</sup> That means that, despite all their genius and its undeniable charms, they have added to the sum of human fatuity. And, to Sainte-Beuve, so peculiarly modest and so eminently sensible, this was of all weaknesses the most abhorrent—so much so that he was perpetually detecting and perpetually deploring its presence in his contemporaries. "I could never conceive why intellectual cleverness, talent, even genius, should necessarily be clothed and as it were coated over with a thin and shining veneer of fatuity."<sup>25</sup> He observes that the era of good sense was almost on the wane in France

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<sup>23</sup> Corr. 1-252.

<sup>24</sup> CL 1-304.

<sup>25</sup> CL 11-525.

when the era of good taste began. The period in which they overlapped and fortified each other was therefore a very short one.<sup>26</sup> Such a judgment implies a far more modest estimate of French literature as a whole than is at all common among the French. It explains Sainte-Beuve's supreme reverence for the Greek genius, and even for the Roman at its best, as well as his aversion for those modern masterpieces from which both good sense and good taste commonly seem so conspicuously absent. "When one has come face to face with Plato, Sophocles and Demosthenes in the original, one is not likely to overrate even the greatest of the moderns."<sup>26a</sup>

These are very great names and they are justly cited as supremely representative of those classic qualities that Sainte-Beuve is here exalting. Their peculiar virtues, a little more closely related to the Greek ideal of intellectual grandeur than to the Greek ideal of aesthetic beauty, Sainte-Beuve undeniably felt and revered. Yet, in comparing him with certain critics of a more severely classic temper, such as Arnold, one is vaguely tempted to add *maior e longinquo reverentia*. It is not this loftier side of the Greek genius that appealed most intimately to Sainte-Beuve. His Hellenism has at its centre a romantic vein. It is above all the refined sensuous beauty of Hellenism rather than its high intellectuality that temperamentally attracts him, it is its feminine even more than its virile aspects. The inspiration he draws from it is Theocritean rather than Platonic. He is excellently classic, but on the side that is nearest akin to romanticism. How dominantly feminine is the tone of the following passage: "All the nations [of Europe] are of the same family, of a family bearing on its brow a stamp of nobility, but in this numerous family, there is one brow elect above all others, one best beloved virgin on whom an incomparable grace had been poured out, who had received in her very cradle the gift of song and harmony, of measure, of perfection (Nausicaa, Helen, Antigone, Electra, Iphigenia, all the noble Venuses); and if this favored child, all

<sup>26</sup> CL 3-256.

<sup>26a</sup> CL 15-372.

genius and charm, this Muse that belonged to such a noble house, if she had been prematurely cut off and immolated, could not all humanity full surely have cried out in lamentation, like a family which has lost its chief joy and honor: the crown of our head is fallen!"<sup>26b</sup> Sainte-Beuve is intensely sensitive to that feminine charm which lies so near the heart of romanticism and which left the ancients a little cold and sometimes even disdainful. He is equally romantic in his cult of what was for the great classics only the stepping-stone to maturity—the poetry of youth. He laughed at the contemporary poets who refused to grow up and to ripen, yet secretly he shared their retrospective passion and nourished the same unhealed wound. "When we grow old, to what period of life can we turn back with pleasure, except to our youth? And I will add, to what other age could we return to interest others and what other could we rehearse with entire fidelity and sincerity? Later life is severe, arid, overwrought; rivalries, ambitions, and unsocial passions invade us; hatreds perturb us; injustice leaves rankling traces that we cherish and magnify: but youth escapes all this; its very griefs and misfortunes are clothed with a vague charm. Here even the embellishments with which we adorn the record are no falsehood; the color that we strive to add in the retrospect will never be anything more than a pale reflection of that happy light that illumined our dawn."<sup>27</sup> After all deduction is made for the play of mood, there is not a little of the romantic mirage here. The tone is not that of one who is looking at life from the vantage-ground of Sainte-Beuve's oft cited trio: Plato, Sophocles, and Demosthenes.

Sainte-Beuve, it is plain, is thoroughly hospitable to romantic sentiment. But sentiment, to be acceptable to him, must bear the stamp of an exquisite taste and it must be of a palpable genuineness. In romantic sentiment, it was the exaggerated and factitious elements that jarred on his sense. He is stirred to the depths by the simple lines in which Joinville tells how, in setting out on his crusade, he

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<sup>26b</sup>CL 15-360.

<sup>27</sup>CL 10-3.



could not turn his eyes toward his home, lest his heart should be overcome at the thought of his beautiful castle which he was leaving and of his two children. And here Sainte-Beuve makes an illuminating comparison with Chateaubriand, who thus begins his "Itinerary from Paris to Jerusalem": "In again leaving my country, I did not fear to look back like the seneschal of Champagne: almost a stranger in my own land, I left behind neither a castle nor a hut." Sainte-Beuve at once points out the romantic falsity, the Byronic pose, in the words of this pilgrim, "who set up as the last of the crusaders, when he was only the first of the tourists." "The illustrious author," he says, "touches me with these words less than he would wish; it is very true that to possess a castle, or even a house or a cottage, moves a departing traveler to tears; yet even if one has no possessions in his native land, there are places that touch and pierce the heart at the moment when one separates from them with a farewell glance. But if one is not at all moved, it is best to wend one's way without telling us why and without calling our attention to the fact."<sup>28</sup>

To a sense for romantic detail Sainte-Beuve joins a sense for classic wholeness: he insists on this more collective and hidden beauty as an essential of literary art:

"Three readers out of four judge a book by a random page, by a given beauty or defect, by an isolated impression, and not by a deliberate survey of the whole. The very youthful reader especially does not form his impressions at leisure, but, without canvassing them, rushes forward like an excited bull at the sight of the scarlet cloth. Now, to see one thing while recalling a different one, to keep unfalteringly in mind, implicated in one's thought, multiple and almost contradictory relationships, that is to be at the farthest removed from the excited bull, that is in the highest degree the peculiar province of the human judgment; and, in the execution of a work of art, it is the chief glory."<sup>29</sup>

There we have an uncompromising expression of the classic ideal. The romanticist will decidedly repudiate it.

<sup>28</sup> CL 8-505.

<sup>29</sup> PC 2-215.

To set up the classic style as the only truly acceptable one, or to set up the romantic style as the only adequately expressive one, is to erect a personal preference or a temperamental leaning into a rigid dogma. Style is not simply a garment that is chosen with taste and neatly fitted to the wearer's thought—it is his thought itself that assumes the appropriate shape, or else there is no true style. Let nature put in a serene spirit a large and luminous notion of order, a disinterested and commanding vision, a sense of wholeness in things, and the style will gravitate toward classic measure. But let nature—and chance cooperating—stir the heart to strange and passionate movements, to an overwhelming sense of the mystery of things, of the limitless cravings of emotion and aspiration, of the alternating ecstasies and frustrations of the spirit, and the style will gravitate toward romantic excess. It is not the question which is the finer mood philosophically—it is no doubt better to be a Wordsworth than a Byron. But neither could express himself with the instrument of the other. Art would not be art if it had not an ultimate core of contemplative serenity at its centre or a warm cincture of human feeling at its circumference. It requires both instruments of expression if it is adequately to embody all its range of moods. And it requires even in its single moods, if the part is to suggest the whole, that each of these opposed manners be suggestive in some degree of its opposite, that the classic style admit a tinge of romantic strangeness, and the romantic style a sense of classic measure—just as the night can only reveal itself by what survives in it of the day, and the day is only made bearable to mortal eye by a tempered infusion of the shadows of the night. Yet the two styles remain, for all that, distinct, and keep their centre at opposite poles.

It is above all as regards style that the opposition of the old and the new tendencies is most fundamental. The sober and chaste restraint bordering on severity, the stern subordination of form to matter, which is the distinction of the classic style, is profoundly hostile to the exuberance,

the opulence of color and of imagery, the indulgence of capricious individualism, the complete outpouring of the cornucopia of special gifts without regard to the underlying harmonic theme, that is so characteristic of the romantic genius. We have here again the immemorial conflict of culture and nature, and for one who loved both as deeply as did Sainte-Beuve the dream of a reconciliation was inevitable.

He has so keen a feeling for the presence and the pressure of life itself behind all manifestations of talent that he feels that style is not alone or mainly a matter of study and practice but has its most vital roots in experience, in the variety and intensity of the outer and the inner life. Of this the very condition is a considerable degree of freedom, though liberty is not, here any more than elsewhere, a synonym of license. In speaking of a certain want of alacrity in the manner of Daunou, who had so many of his themes thrust upon him, Sainte-Beuve suggests the rule that we should write only of the things we love. He adds that the routine existence of Daunou, who had never been allowed to follow his own sweet will and had never enjoyed a season of bloom, had disadvantageously modified his style. This whole point of view is more or less romantic.

Sainte-Beuve is always particularly pleased when this essential liveliness is colored by imagination. He hates the "disagreeable and faded out terms, such as *necessities*, *grounds*, *results*, *elements*," that he finds blemishing the style of Armand Carrel; he praises Rivarol for being "rich in metaphors," and because "he never consents to a divorce between imagination and judgment."<sup>30</sup> He is here on a middle-ground where classic and romantic may agree.

What Sainte-Beuve demanded of style was not merely the virtues of classic form, however perfect; he had, what the seventeenth century writers in general lacked, the love of romantic color. He acknowledges, what no unbending partisan of classicism will concede, that "the so-called Attic writers are sometimes a little bare and a little dry."<sup>31</sup> And

<sup>30</sup> CL 5-79.

<sup>31</sup> NL 6-87.



though other faults may be more glaring and more irritating than this one, there is none more essentially anti-literary. "After all," he retorts to the too rigid classicist, "let us not be exclusive and negative in any matter; let us never take distaste for taste, neutrality for power; and, however highly the connoisseur may value it, perish Atticism itself if it can be preserved only by lifelessness, by a stagnation which leads insensibly and swiftly to coldness." Comparing the manner of Arnauld with that of Lamennais, Sainte-Beuve says: "Let us conceive of the latter without that Rousseauistic imagination which colors his style, which streaks and illumines his dialectic and gives it its physiognomy; reduce him to his vigor in fencing, to his logical lucidity, to his declamatory invective . . . conceive him without his turn for metaphor and his flashing falchion, and you will have something like the manner of the great Arnauld. Now, M. de Lamennais, thus reduced, would be very little read."<sup>32</sup> Sainte-Beuve had the latter-day fondness for beauty and brilliancy of detail suffered for its own sake, as is perhaps always the case when style seems peculiarly beautiful or brilliant in its own right. The following passage, in which he criticizes the style of an orator of the Napoleonic period, is one with which no romanticist would be disposed to quarrel: "[The style of C. Jordan] does not offer the novelty, the brilliance, the delicacy, the unforeseen quality, which we love to single out in a born writer, the creative touches, the felicitous combinations, the flowering of detail, and everything that lends variety to each step of the way. He has none of those words of flame that abide, none of those pointed arrows of speech that pierce the ages and lodge themselves in the heart of posterity. In a word, he has talent, a fine talent, but a talent which can work no miracles. Chateaubriand wrought such miracles in the midst of many haphazard touches."<sup>33</sup>

The miracles of talent, however, could not hide from Sainte-Beuve the fundamental defects of the writers of his day. La Bruyère said that if prose is infused with all the

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<sup>32</sup> PR 2-174.<sup>33</sup> NL 12-288.

order and all the limpidity possible it insensibly takes on also the quality of *esprit*. It is this contingent *esprit* that Sainte-Beuve finds so deplorably absent in the literature of the age. "Under so many pleasing, sparkling, or imposing surfaces, penetrate to the bottom: what you find is the veiled ambition to fill up pages, columns, or volumes. There results an inordinate development of detail, of detail snatched at, embellished, amplified, and long drawn out . . . It is impossible to tell how prominent is this vice even in the greatest talents, in the finest poems, and in the most splendid pages of prose, along with endless cleverness, facility, dexterity, technical skill. How much there is of this lurking defect, indistinguishable to the average reader, and often escaping even the man of taste, if he is not wary, how much of this counterfeit and mirage of talent . . . It is appalling what a proportion of sham there is in the finest productions of the present day . . . but this hollow echoes only the more sonorously on the popular ear."<sup>34</sup> French romanticism from the first offended his taste, not because it was romantic, but because it was so largely factitious, exaggerated, and even bombastic: "Force rules to-day . . . where formerly we found beauty, subtlety, delicacy, graceful irony, and the airy spirit of the Muse. We hear only eulogies of force, in place and out of place, hit or miss: it is the glorious age of the so-called giants of thought; be a Vulcan or a Cyclops, fabricate and forge, let all Lemnos echo with your blows, hurl blindly from overhead vast boulders, hurl them plentifully and frequently: you will be admired, you will be promoted to godhead."<sup>35</sup> Sainte-Beuve says of Hugo's inaugural speech at the Academy that it was fit only to be bellowed in a Colosseum, to an audience of Romans, Thracians, and wild beasts.<sup>36</sup> He says, alluding to Musset: "In the way of passion, we see nowadays nothing but people who shriek as if writhing in convulsions." He accuses Musset of an habitual incoherency: "In his son-

<sup>34</sup> PL 1-412.

<sup>35</sup> Chat. 1-77 (note).

<sup>36</sup> Olivier 269.

net to Victor Hugo, which is at any rate intelligible, what a farrago:

Les bonbons, l'océan, le jeu, l'azur des cieux,  
Les femmes, les chevaux, les lauriers et les roses!

There are perhaps people who admire that. It is pure mannerism and fatuity."<sup>37</sup> "Never perhaps in any age did the declamatory and the highly colored, the perversion of literary style, predominate over substance and truth as in recent years."<sup>38</sup> He says of the romantic drama of Hugo and Dumas, whose advent he had done much to prepare, that "historic falsity, the absence of study in the subjects, the gigantic and the frantic in feeling have everywhere been glaringly and overwhelmingly apparent; I had hoped to open the way for the passage of a chivalrous, bold, but civilized army, and there poured in an invasion of barbarians."<sup>39</sup> As to the poets, his disappointment was so great that he looked for a more satisfying poetry to his neighbors across the Channel. "Our poets," he says, "are too quickly read, they are too light, too sophisticated, too perverted for the most part; they are too barren of ideas, even when they possess the talent for strophe and verse, to hold for long and to interest a serious mind."<sup>40</sup> He advises a correspondent to study English, because this would open to him a treasure-house of good verse, "a poetic literature far superior to the French, and above all more sound and more substantial."<sup>41</sup> And, more remotely still, antiquity, Virgil and Horace,—Virgil, the most perfect of poets, the one who best imparts "the lesson of taste, of harmony, of sustained and moderated human beauty,"<sup>42</sup> and Horace, "the invariable starting-point, the alpha and omega of men of taste,"<sup>43</sup>—offered him the satisfactions which his own age would not give: "Nero, the false virtuoso, the artist who was all sham and superficiality, Nero, when he was not a bellowing

<sup>37</sup> CL 11-468.

<sup>38</sup> PR 2-45.

<sup>39</sup> Chron. (5 mai, 1845).

<sup>40</sup> N Corr. 356.

<sup>41</sup> Corr. 1-273.

<sup>42</sup> Virgile 104.

<sup>43</sup> NL 5-247.



tragedian or a delirious Orestes, especially prized and emulated Lucan.\* The Lucans, and their likes belonging to the same family, are swollen and bombastic, and this showy pomp, this purely external inflation, is compatible with much internal vacuousness; the hollow is in proportion to the swelling. So much violence serves very aptly to veil their tricks of style, their charlatanry, and their falsehood. I can understand that one should issue from among these false or pretentious beauties that smack of Lucan, more heated and more intoxicated than touched, softened, purified, or moved. I defy anyone to maintain that this is also possible for him who is a devotee of Virgil."<sup>44</sup> And elsewhere he says: "How opportune at this moment would be for us the Virgilian genius or at least the Virgilian temper. Not to run to excess, not to overreach oneself, rather to stop short just a little, not to emphasize either the line or the tone, these are the precepts that we need to have held up to us. Never has Latin literature, studied in its classic age, in its Augustan phase, with all that it offers of dignity, of gravity, of precision, of nobility and good sense, never has it been more needed than to-day . . . The manner that is reposeful and ennobling is the manner to which in the end one should fain revert on the return from explorations on every side with their excesses and their fatiguing strain."<sup>45</sup>

It is the faults and the eccentricities of the contemporary writers, rather than the modernism of which they are representatives, that Sainte-Beuve dislikes. Herein lies the explanation of the negative note that is so prominent in his judgments of nineteenth century literature. The age had inherited the anarchy created by the eighteenth century revolt from tradition. It had to live amid this anarchy and had to fashion out of its ruins such fragile and temporary refuges for the spirit as it could contrive. As a critic, Sainte-Beuve was pledged to picture these conditions as they really were, and to estimate their questionable fruitage at its true worth. He felt that the romantic age was

\* In Victor Hugo's day the name Lucan often had a double meaning: *La rime dit Lucain, et la raison Hugo.*

<sup>44</sup> NL 2-129.

<sup>45</sup> Virgile 107.

not one of the great literary epochs and could not furnish genius, however brilliant, with the material and the background for a great literary monument. It was more or less inevitably condemned by the unsoundness of its own temper to produce a decadent literature, in which form and substance, line and color, should inharmoniously clash, and which must needs result in an art which (as he says of that of Gautier) "would build a church of Brou as a catafalque for the lascivious sparrow of Lesbia,"<sup>46</sup> "We have," he adds, "in our day laid so much stress on color, that we have, it seems, altogether forgotten that there are odors. There is a certain lack of taste, a certain seasoning of sentiment gone to decay, that like a pernicious scent permeates the whole work and corrupts all our pleasure." Sainte-Beuve complained that there was no longer any norm of taste in his day for works in verse.<sup>47</sup> And most of the prose of the time impressed him as equally lawless. "I am aware," he says, "that the doctrine of excess, of so-called legitimate exaggeration, of monstrosity even, is the order of the day: I must be allowed to make all sorts of reservations and to hold somewhat aloof for the most part; I have retained of my old literary habits a reluctance to fatigue myself and even a craving to take pleasure in what I admire."<sup>48</sup> He came to feel ultimately that the dissolution in literature was general—he denounces the nineteenth century as an age of charlatanism. He feels that to see romanticism in perspective and with mature detachment is to enjoy the privilege of a convalescent looking back on the disease from which he has escaped: "Romanticism, humanitarianism, are but a kind of passion, and I might say of disease, which young talents must needs contract, becoming the more mature in proportion as they more completely recover. It is doubtless impossible to pass with impunity through these various systems; one retains some imprints, some tincture, some tricks; but, after all, one rises out of them if one has a talent capable of maturing."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> PC 2-523.

<sup>47</sup> Corr. 1-207.

<sup>48</sup> NL 8-95.

<sup>49</sup> PC 2-535.

Sainte-Beuve matured, and in a way the age matured also. "Good sense and high poetry," he says, "to my mind go very well together."<sup>50</sup> The age ended by demanding them also. In fact when constrained to make Hobson's choice between poetry void of sense in Hugo's "Burgraves" and sense void of poetry in Ponsard's "Lucrèce," it hailed this timely dramatist as the founder of "the school of good-sense." The romantic school seemed to Sainte-Beuve, as the years passed, more and more an anachronism. It had remained obstinately stationary, a Narcissus contemplating itself in the stream of time and refusing to embark upon it in quest of new experiences and new destinies. "The world," he writes in 1865, "is becoming mortally tired of the eternal singsong; it listened, not patiently but passionately, to all the great lamenters from Job to Childe-Harold . . . but it has had enough for a time of these complaints intoned on meres and mountains. Our poetry lies elsewhere: it has withdrawn from the desert, it has spread into a multitude of places and themes; it has insinuated itself in a round-about but vital fashion into history, into erudition, into criticism, into manifold arts, into the living reconstruction of the past, into the theory of languages and of human origins, into the very perspectives of science and of future civilization; it has dwindled proportionately in its primary and personal fountain; the latter is now only a solitary torrent, a monotonous cascade, while all the land around, far and near, is irriguous, fecund and alive with running waters bubbling on every side."<sup>51</sup>

We have seen how Sainte-Beuve in certain moods conceived genius with the usual romantic distortion and saw in it a transfiguration of tragic experience, of a *wound*. In his riper and more permanent mood he sees genius in a juster light as an exhilarated heightening of human faculty, as something essentially enviable. He views the man of genius as Michelangelo viewed Dante:

Gladly would I, to be such as he,  
For his hard exile and calamity  
Forego the happiest fortunes of mankind.

<sup>50</sup> CL 11-370 (note).

<sup>51</sup> NL 10-156.



When the poet Laprade says, as Vigny had said before him, that the mightier the genius the vaster its burden of pain, and that greatness is a sort of crucifixion, Sainte-Beuve retorts: "That is only fit to be put into verse: what can't be said is sung. The woe of great poets is a fine theme, and a few illustrious names suffice to justify it, provided that the singer who has laid hold of this idea infuse it with emotion and harmony. But in prose, and in dealing with plain fact, there is too much to be said in refutation. . . . As for me, I should readily conceive, and on naturalistic and physiological grounds, the maintainance of the opposite thesis. Great genius for him who possesses it is the source of great joy."<sup>52</sup>

Sainte-Beuve, in this classic mood, even falls in with Goethe's celebrated dictum that classic art is sound art and romantic art is sickly art:

"The romanticist suffers from nostalgia, like Hamlet; he seeks for what he cannot find, he seeks it even beyond the clouds, he muses, and lives in his dreams. In the nineteenth century he adores the Middle Ages, in the eighteenth he is already a revolutionist with Rousseau. In the sense of Goethe, there have been romanticists in all ages: the young man of Chrysostom, Stagyrius, Augustine in his youth, were romanticists, anticipatory Renés, a prey to their malady. But they were sick men who looked forward to recovery, and Christianity was their cure: it exorcised the demon. Hamlet, Werther, Childe-Harold, the genuine Renés, court disease for the sake of singing and suffering, for the pleasure of their malady, they are romanticists more or less from dilettantism—it is a case of disease for disease's sake."<sup>53</sup>

"Romantic literatures, which are the product of audacity and of adventure, have their merits, their exploits, their brilliant rôle, but they are outside of the traditional framework; they sit astride of two or three epochs, never firmly established in a single one; they are restless, tentative, centrifugal by their very nature, either running very far ahead or lagging very far behind, habitually alien and errant. Classic art does not lament, does not moan, does not suffer

<sup>52</sup> NL 1-14.

<sup>53</sup> CL 15-371.

from ennui. Sometimes the poet achieves a farther reach in the company of pain and through pain, but beauty is more tranquil."<sup>54</sup>

In such passages one sees the growth and the deepening of a preference, of a leaning—not exclusive, not even very definitely determined—toward the classic ideal. The attitude is not of the firm and unmistakably clear-cut kind that the philosophic critic cherishes; it offers rather the oscillating hesitancy of the man of taste, who is less determined by principles than seduced or repelled by works, and who takes his pleasure wherever he finds it, provided it be genuine and not of too fragile a charm. Other critics may teach us how to choose between romanticism and classicism, on what deeper grounds to accept or to reject; Sainte-Beuve is, on the whole, satisfied with merely discriminating between the higher and the lower ranges of each with enough neutrality and enough balance to prevent us from wholly falling in the direction in which we lean. It is not a solution of this vexing problem, but it is the most literary approach thus far made toward this as yet invincible sphinx.

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<sup>54</sup> CL 15-370.

## XII

### SAINTE-BEUVE AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

At length a reverend sire among them came,  
And of their doings great dislike declared,  
And testified against their ways.

—Milton

If the man is violent, vulgar, blinded by self-love, extravagant in his doctrines, indelicate, debauched (there are such men), I have found it hard to refrain from seeking in the work the reflection of these faults; and my judgments, or rather my impressions, have been colored by all this—a thing which may dismay and offend the reader of today for whom the works alone subsist while the author has vanished.

—Sainte-Beuve

I have already spoken of a certain lucklessness that dogged Sainte-Beuve through life; it has persisted since his death. Of all the romantic group among whom he began his career, he is undeniably the one whose work suffered least from the weaknesses and profited most by the excellences of his character. If one wished to convey to a foreigner a compendious idea of what was finest in the culture of France in the mid-century, one could find for the purpose nothing equal to one of Sainte-Beuve's *Causeries*. Yet the generations that have followed the great critic for half a century have treated him with a coldness that can only be set down as injustice. They have judged his rivals with a curious laxity, all the harder to understand in view of their severity toward him. Such words as *envy*, *rancor*, *malignity*, interspersed from time to time with harsher ones like *gall*, *poison*, *venom*, drop readily from the same pens as inscribe Hugo among the genuine lovers of mankind, Lamartine among the Platonic idealists, Vigny among the semi-saints, and Balzac among the heroic incarnations of literary greatness. Nay, even Baudelaire has his shrine and his worshippers. "Sainte-Beuve was an ugly, sensual,



curious, and very intelligent man,"—that is the way in which Faguet opens his study of his great master. The *Causeries*, we might observe, begin with more urbanity. Brunetière speaks of Sainte-Beuve's "appetites, ambitions, and rancors," and, forgetting the old proverb about the pot and the kettle, adds that "it is his rancor that he sacrifices least willingly." Once more we are somewhat remote from the polite charm which the *Causeries* offer, even when speaking of Hugo, Lamartine, Vigny, and Balzac! Yet Brunetière refuses to include the *Causeries* among the better of Sainte-Beuve's productions, because too much hatred of his contemporaries transpires there, because he waits only for their death to pour out the vials of his unforgetting rancor, and because he neglects the work in order to fasten on the man! On the other hand, in 1904, speaking in the more flattering style of an anniversary eulogist, he says: "He survives and he is himself, he is the man whose talent we admire and whose memory we respect, only in his critical work, in his *Portraits*, in his *Port-Royal*, in his *Lundis*, in which doubtless we still find him, but in which the faults of his character are masked, effaced, and finally as it were abolished, by the disinterestedness of his curiosity, by the abundance of his knowledge, the penetration of his intellect, the fineness of his judgment, and the loftiness of his impartiality." How ironically the spirit of Sainte-Beuve must have smiled at the flatness of the contradiction! He, the man of changes and metamorphoses, offers no parallel to this. Indeed, if one compares the serene manner of Sainte-Beuve with the clouded and morose manner of Brunetière, it is the latter who impresses us as rancorous, not in spots and at moments, but with a general and diffused ill-will that runs through all his work and imparts so unpleasant and (Sainte-Beuve would have added) so anti-literary a flavor to ideas that are otherwise so original and often so weighty.

Yet Sainte-Beuve, it is evident, must have done something to justify the charges brought against him. They are not the result of a conspiracy of caprices, though they sug-

gest that the inevitable *légende* that gathers about a great name is not invariably of the decorative order. Sainte-Beuve suffered some noisome weeds to grow in the garden of his life, and they threaten now almost wholly to overgrow his monument and to hide the inscription that records his virtues. There is danger that the new generation may see in him even more the ugly, sensual, and malignant man that he is accused of being than the highly intelligent man that he unquestionably was. The provocation, in so far as his writings are concerned, lies on the whole in the extreme irritability of his temper, and in the variations of his tone, his early timidity expressing itself behind a veil of restrictive eulogy and his later independence of judgment often rending the veil with a seeming wantonness.

Sainte-Beuve is not a critic of the militant order. He did not even aspire to be such—he was too much attached to the ideal of urbanity, in spite of its restraints, which he had his own ways of obviating. It must be added that he lacked the virtue of uncompromising courage. His attitude toward certain questionable contemporaries in high place, though not servile, was decidedly circumspect; and, when they ceased to be a power, he was apt to exhibit a markedly deeper shade of disapprobation than before. While he still kept up his social ties, before his hermit days, he valued the prestige and the influence of the men who held more commanding positions than the humble critic in his attic chamber. He was not ascetic enough to renounce the world and its ways so completely as to refuse an occasional *coup d'en-censoir obligé* to those who could make or mar his future, though he tried always by recondite strokes of ingenuity to pay homage to them and to the truth at the same time. He was not of so massive a personality as to maintain his independence in defiance of opposition. He skirted the rocks at a discreet distance. His constantly recurring eulogies of the outspokenness of that rather gruff oracle Royer-Collard are suggestive. He admired in him a quality that he knew to be lacking in himself. Timidity is nearly always a bit disingenuous. It fostered in Sainte-Beuve another trait

that seems a little surprising in a mind of such eminence: a fondness for indirection, for veiled hints, for saying only half the truth while yet covertly implying the other half. When he feels an antipathy, therefore, he does not rule it out: he attentuates it; he hints it with a delicately scanted courtesy that runs the risk of seeming calculatingly ironic; he sugars the pill, even at the double risk of letting the unwary suppose it to be all sugar, and the wary suspect it of being all poison. And when the antipathy, so subtly disguised, is not simply casual but fundamental, his criticism is so quietly yet so insidiously destructive, that it appears malignant. To undermine an adversary seems less chivalrous than to hew him down. Sometimes he just hints a fault with such delicacy that only the most discerning detect the negative import—and later he subjoins a footnote in which the same fault stands out in bold relief, and what seemed a just perceptible irregularity becomes a deformity. But if we now turn from the portrait to the original, we shall see the deformity there also. Another and still odder peculiarity is a fondness for employing more or less transparent disguises, for citing the *obiter dicta*, the private correspondence, or the note-books, of alleged friends and critics. He does not even pretend always to conceal this artful duplicity from his reader. He quotes a half page from Sir Joshua Reynolds—and a later footnote informs us that this pretended citation was only a roundabout way of insinuating his own opinion!<sup>1</sup> And in this very note he quotes a friend as comparing Vigny to streaked alabaster, *de l'albâtre chagriné*,—and when next he writes on Vigny we meet this self-same phrase and learn that it is Sainte-Beuve's own! Evidently there are here wheels within wheels. One would prefer a more sustained ingenuousness. The uncharitable see in these devices the shifty cunning of an envious and malicious spirit, secretly discharging poisoned arrows from behind a screen. It seems more consonant with justice, as well as with charity, to see rather a mingling of timidity and of mischievousness. Sainte-

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<sup>1</sup> PC 2-77.



Beuve not infrequently takes a slightly puerile delight (for the most part of a very innocent order) in mystifying, and sometimes even in scandalizing, his readers. It is an indirect manner of being lively—and criticism, unhappily, without occasional diversions, is not a very lively trade.

Let us take, as an example of his subtle and complicated manner, his treatment of two very prominent contemporaries:

“Monsieur Villemain has more delicate tints, Monsieur Cousin has a bolder touch. Only, if some one in reading the latter, struck by so many large effects that compel admiration, should be tempted to prefer him as a writer, and should tell him so, we are very sure that he would himself be the first to bid his admirer turn again to the style of Villemain and would say: ‘Look well; you have not seen all.’ ”<sup>2</sup>

Of all his contemporaries there were none whom Sainte-Beuve disliked more cordially (while at the same time admiring many sides of their work) than Villemain and Cousin. For one familiar with the overbearing personality of Cousin and his unrivaled admiration for himself, the feline duplicity of such a compliment as this, in which Cousin is himself made a party to the preference hinted for his rival’s style, will be apparent.

It is evident in these judgments that Sainte-Beuve’s personal detestation of both Cousin and Villemain does not pervert or even color his opinion of their talent and their work. Of these he speaks with appreciative respect—a respect that posterity has not even ratified, for it refuses to read either of them. Cousin, once so great a force in the field of letters, of philosophy, and of politics, who might have said with Wren, *Si monumenta quaeris, circumspice*, lies there now like a spent thunderbolt, an exploded piece of greatness. He is at best but coldly commemorated by the conscientious historian of literature. And Villemain, once so universally acclaimed and now as universally neglected, is an even more puzzling enigma to those curious of the vicissitudes of greatness. Sainte-Beuve felt, in a way that his infatuated con-

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<sup>2</sup> CL 1-120.

temporaries did not, the weak and the hollow places in these superficially brilliant talents. He has pointed them out clearly. Yet he also felt to the full the spell by which their eloquence veiled their shortcomings both of talent and of personality. To see their human frailties, to suffer from them and to resent them, to see the cracks and blemishes in their talent, and at the same time to praise that very talent with a warmth that seems to our cooler latter-day sense almost extravagant—that is hardly suggestive of malice.

Cousin and Villemain figured so long and so prominently on Sainte-Beuve's horizon that it is interesting to study his attitude toward them more fully. At first, and for many years, he treated both with all the deference which seniority and talent then as ever demanded—and sometimes even obtained. Presently, however, both Cousin and Villemain gave Sainte-Beuve reasons for just resentment. How deep this was is apparent in his letters to them. He writes to Villemain:

"In regard to yourself, sir, I now consider my first and complete independence as restored; my attitude toward you, during the dozen and more years that I have had the honor of knowing you, has been such that I certainly have no desire to give it the lie in future: I shall maintain it, but without constraining myself; the asperity that comes with riper years (Molière's *Misanthrope* was a man of thirty-six, as I conceive him) may transpire at times, but, I hope, not too frequently; the charming talent and the accomplished writer will always win my homage. The passing years, even more than my wanderings through the world, have taught me to do without fellowship, even though the fellow involved be rich in gifts. I have learned to believe less than ever in real friendship, in disinterested attachment, and to see in all this only a comedy which most people accept seriously, but which often frets my patience more than it should. Friendship, nevertheless, and it alone, is no doubt sweet and consolatory; but it must be unwavering, and must not be complicated by all the ticklish sensations proceeding from

praises that are relished or disrelished; and you have shown me that in your case, through my fault, no doubt, this complication exists."<sup>3</sup>

In another letter, to Bersot, he writes:

"I speak without evasion, for I have no animosity at heart, and I esteem those who have in some measure been my masters; for some thirty-five years and more I have found myself in the neighborhood of Villemain, that great talent, that brilliant mind, all gilded and adorned with generous, liberal, philanthropic, Christian, and civilizing sentiments, though he is at bottom the most sordid soul and the most malicious ape in existence! . . . Must I go on perpetually praising his nobility and elevation of spirit, as all his courtiers do? Must I be duped and dupe others? . . . As soon as one penetrates a little below the surface of society or of nature, nothing appears but wars, struggles, destruction, and recomposition. This Lucretian view of criticism is not exhilarating; but, once attained, it seems preferable, even in its exalted gloom, to the cult of idols."<sup>4</sup>

There we have an apparently frank statement of the motives of Sainte-Beuve's severities in the case of Villemain. His occasional praises of Villemain's talent reach their high point in a letter to the Oliviers (January 1, 1845): "Villemain, the finest mind and the greatest literary intelligence in France, has gone mad. . . It is a humiliation for the human spirit." Villemain, however, committed the indiscretion of recovering his wits—and Sainte-Beuve resumed his asperity. Yet a decade later his generous appreciation of Villemain's talent is expressed with equal frankness in a letter to a young writer who had compared the respective merits of Sainte-Beuve and Villemain to the disadvantage of the latter: "Permit me, in cordially thanking you, to beg you by all means to modify certain passages at least. I cannot suffer myself to be called the first in any respect, above all not as a writer: it is not admissible, and such classifications are invidious. You do not grant Villemain his full deserts: his personal faculties are marvellous, phenom-

<sup>3</sup> Corr. 1-100.

<sup>4</sup> Corr. 1-316.



enal. Pen in hand, he impresses one a little less than as a speaker; but his talent all in all is the richest and the most brilliant that one can conceive in a critical writer. Modify in this sense what you have written—I think it only just.”<sup>5</sup> If this is malice, it has an odd resemblance to magnanimity.

Let us turn to Cousin. He had, with his characteristic unscrupulousness, exploited Sainte-Beuve by borrowing and utilizing documents which the latter was holding in reserve for his “Port-Royal.”\* Sainte-Beuve writes indignantly:

“Allow me to break a silence which I have too long maintained as to certain practices which my obligations toward you cannot prevent me from finding ungracious and reprehensible, and which you would never have ventured on in dealing with your equals and *confrères*.

“This is the third time within a year that you have reached out your hand to snatch from before me the dish out of which I was about to help myself, and which I considered as reserved for me by a sort of common courtesy and recognized equity, such as, indeed, seem no longer to exist . . . If I were to borrow from you a manuscript on Descartes, and if I should find in it letters which were to enter as documents into some work of yours on the Cartesian philosophy, would I fling myself upon these letters, shout *Eureka*, and preempt the attention of the *Journal des Savants*, of two Academies, and of the whole press?—No, even could I do so, I would not. Do you see now that when I say that man is not a free agent and that I do not believe in free-will, I realize also that you are not free to refrain from doing these things and to resist the push of your appetite?

“In any case, although I have consented to be under obligations to you for an important and lasting favor, and one that I cannot forget, it does not follow that I am bound to suffer these uncivil dealings, which, considering your impetuosity, are likely enough to continue; at any rate I wish, for my part, to protest and to tell you that I resent them.

<sup>5</sup> Corr. 1-218.

\* See CL 11-470 (LXX).

"All these documents are public property, and every one is free to publish them; but the circumstances are, in this case, such that if you had proposed to yourself to discourage an undertaking for which I have never solicited encouragement from any one, you could not have chosen better. That is precisely what I wished to communicate, while retaining intact the feeling of admiration, of respect, and of gratitude which I owe to you."<sup>6</sup>

That certainly is no unworthy parallel to Johnson's famous letter to Lord Chesterfield.

As time passes, the innuendoes, in dealing with contemporaries, lose all suggestion of clogging hesitancy and subterfuge. They are no longer a disguise in which timidity cloaks itself, but a transparent veil worn in homage to etiquette, and worn with a coquettish grace that makes it a ravishing literary ornament. The irony, so quietly disdainful in its urbanity, only gains in plausible force from the restrictions which it secretly welcomes as a supreme challenge to its ingenuity. We read with a renewal of the delight that Plato and Pascal offer to their devotees. The following page on the historian Mignet might have been more courteous, it might have been more censorious; yet how very little of either quality has been sacrificed in uniting both these opposites in what might seem a quite impossible amalgamation:

"It was not a necessary part of M. Mignet's plan to say all these things, perhaps he has never even known them except vaguely; for this worthy and highly talented man has a tendency, it seems to me, to see only imperfectly whatever does not lie fully exposed to his view—a tendency which is very conducive to a serene outlook. I should not even be much surprised if, despite his intimacy with Jouffroy, he had never gone to hear a single one of his lectures. M. Mignet is by nature little inclined to metaphysics; he deemed it a very unsubstantial pabulum in his youth, and nowadays he is very willing to accept it ready-made from the hands of his friends. His true superiority lies in the

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<sup>6</sup> Corr. 1-116.

manner in which he understands and treats history, not that of our day, which takes place under his eyes (that is too shifting and inconstant) but dead history, reconstituted after the event. Here, a master of his ground, operating on a firm footing, taking his own time and his own measures, he studies the facts, he orders and combines them, he fortifies them and welds them into cunningly wrought compositions that interest, and that evince judgment, and that have some strong and showy parts. What they perhaps lack of alertness and sagacity would not be readily felt unless this method were applied to purely contemporary history. In that case we should perceive, I fancy, that the meshes of the net, however cunningly woven, are far too large and often let the fish through. As official spokesman of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences, and as author of brief biographies and eulogies, M. Mignet has likewise a manner of his own, ample, brilliant, majestic, a little massive, eminently well adapted for a façade and a frontispiece.”<sup>7</sup>

The more serious motive behind Sainte-Beuve's veiled dislikes and his occasional outright dispraise of his contemporaries, is, so he constantly assures us and, I think, with fairly whole-hearted sincerity, the love of exact and truthful portraiture, such as alone will endure the tooth of time, for time also is, in these so abundantly documented days, an enemy of pedestals. But if time, in the long run, is a discreet sifter of true from false, it can nevertheless only repeat what is confided to it, and a conspiracy of admiration, if an author have the skill and the cunning to provoke it, may rouse a very prolonged echo. Sainte-Beuve was very readily exasperated by swollen reputations and by artfully concocted glories, especially by the shameless self-glorification so much in vogue in his day.

It must be said to his credit that he followed the career of letters in an honorable fashion, scorning all the common devices for pushing obliquely into favor. He relied from beginning to end on his sole talents even though devoted to

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<sup>7</sup> CL 8-305.



a branch of literature whose appeal is circumscribed and whose rewards are at best mediocre. He thus felt all the more justified in performing what is one of the chief functions of criticism, that of distinguishing between good and bad in men and books, and of protesting against the conventional godhead thrust upon those who have achieved celebrity. Sainte-Beuve is an enemy of pedestals because he is a realistic portrait-painter and not an idealizing sculptor. Simulacra, whether in color or in marble, should resemble, not flatter. The portrait is to be found delineated unconsciously in a great man's words and deeds; the statue is to be disengaged from the block of the writer's works ( in the Pauline sense of the word). If Sainte-Beuve learns that Florian, the sugary sentimentalist, used to beat his mistress, who shall blame him for saying: "Do not forget hereafter to let this fact serve as frontispiece to the fables or pastorals of Florian"?<sup>8</sup> Not those for whom truth is better than fiction and who are open to the suggestion that sentimentalism is often allied with hardness of heart. As Sainte-Beuve says, "when we know so well the exact point which is most vulnerable, it is difficult many a time even for the least malicious not to be cruel."<sup>9</sup> Such occasions presented themselves to Sainte-Beuve frequently enough, and we have seen that he usually contrived in some fashion to get the truth uttered. It may seem paradoxical, yet it is undeniable that his very reluctance to tell the irrepressible truth with a brutal directness and to blurt out his opinion with a cruel unconcern, has in no inconsiderable degree been responsible for the imputation to him of tortuousness and spitefulness.

His irritability sometimes intervenes like a mist and obscures his habitual geniality; it does not blacken it into malice. He magnifies his grievance when he has one, he tenderly nurses his rankling wound, but he does not flout justice in malicious pursuit of revenge. This tendency to take life and mankind in a hurt and plaintive manner and to convert his days into so many elegies was, in his early years, a besetting weakness, but it was nothing more. And

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<sup>8</sup> NL 12-147.

<sup>9</sup> CL 7-25.

something of an original weakness we usually carry on into mature life. Sainte-Beuve remained to the end a somewhat temperamental and uncomfortable person to deal with. But the critic was in general so superior to the man in him, his effort to achieve impartiality was so scrupulous, and on the whole so successful, that his lapses are apt to seem wilful and calculated, when in reality it is only the tremor of wounded feeling that is involuntarily communicated from the hand to the critical balance. But this inferior mood in Sainte-Beuve's work is rarer than one would suppose. Brunetière as we have seen, decried the *Lundis* because of constant attacks on contemporaries—yet not one essay in a dozen, perhaps, deals with contemporaries, and the majority even of these essays are models of amenity. It is rarely indeed that the man seems to get the better of the critic in Sainte-Beuve and to forget justice; more often the two compromise, and the result is justice without generosity—but the compromise is in the nature of a concession, not of a conspiracy. In general we find justice and generosity so finely attuned that each seems to take precedence of the other. This, however, is what so many of his critics, still under the spell of the questionable and over-estimated literature of the last century, refuse to see. They so over-emphasize this little weakness in Sainte-Beuve's criticism that it becomes a great one in their own, and reinforces our despair, in turning from him to his successors, of ever again seeing the fineness of taste and rightness of feeling which were his central virtues. Monsieur Michaut, in his not altogether fortunate book on Sainte-Beuve (in the *Grands Ecrivains* series), a book remarkably documented and learned, and scientifically competent, yet so coldly academic, Sainte-Beuve à la glace, without one touch of cordiality and without one page that thrills with the recognition of true greatness—Monsieur Michaut uses the word *rancune* at every turn, almost if not quite to the exclusion of the word *génie*. One has a right to protest against such ungenerous treatment of one of the chief intellectual glories of nineteenth century France. Matthew Arnold, in his essay on

Sainte-Beuve, has neither the word *rancor* nor the idea. But such is the way of the world. Enumerate, but only on rare occasions and with polite attenuations, the secret blemishes you find in the character of one whom you know intimately enough to be both penetrating and convincing, and you will, as a rule, on each of these occasions be accused of ill-will. Do the same thing not rarely but habitually, not reservedly but boldly, and you will be respected as severe but just. How many of his scores of contemporaries did Boileau ever praise? A half dozen (the right half dozen, it should be added), and Boileau passes, and rightly, for a just judge. Johnson was less happy but not less severe in his judgments, yet we accuse him at worst only of Tory prejudice. Brunetière, surely one of the least genial of all critics since Zoilus, can dilate on the rancor of Sainte-Beuve without fear of any injurious *tu quoque*. And Scherer, with his incorruptible Genevan severity, can with safety, in more unmeasured terms, heap on the same men the same reproaches that Sainte-Beuve more guardedly brought against them, and, though we speak of his stern temper, we never speak of his rancor. Sainte-Beuve differs from all these critics, however, in one respect: he carries into his criticism far more of personal sensitiveness and, unhappily, also of personal susceptibility. He belongs most decidedly to the *genus irritabile*.

Sainte-Beuve, moving on this less dignified level, might well have said of himself—and let me therefore say it—what he said in presenting to the Princess Mathilde a copy of that amusing old tale-bearer Tallemant des Réaux: “He is one who is not blind to the petty sides of men, he is a gossip; but he is sincere and he has judgment; if he loves mischief, he has no malice and he does not lie. Such as he is, I lay him at your feet.”<sup>10</sup> One is quite ready to believe—even though the Goncourts tell it—that in the heat of discussion he actually called Villemain “contemptible” and raised his umbrella to strike him, just as he is said to have called Nicolardot a “fetid bundle” and to have kicked him

<sup>10</sup> *Princesse* 249.



down stairs. Taste in action is sometimes strangely dissimilar to taste in repose. This over-susceptible taste could not often find vent in action; like Hamlet, the critic had to unpack his heart with words. And he was bursting with secrets. Unless he was, like Midas's barber, content to whisper them to the reeds, he must needs take the public into his confidence.

In growing old, the celibate, deprived, through long years, of intimate feminine society, develops a feminine side in his own personality. The woman missing in his home comes into being in his head; the old bachelor, if you scratch the surface, is found to be inwardly possessed with an old maid. Among his masculine characteristics a few female traits crop out; among his virile thoughts there appears at time an anile prejudice; and the manly resonance of his voice now and then breaks into a shrill *false* *setto*. The old maid in Sainte-Beuve is an occasional drawback to the generally amiable charm of his personality when her not altogether agreeable profile outlines itself behind the comely maturity of his later work. This feminine side of his nature finds expression in feline compliments that are more damaging than frank censure, in sly statements that pillory a weakness while seeming only to convey the most casual of observations, in anecdotes that appear innocently amusing but in which there lurks a just perceptible drop of gall. "I have stung or wrung more hearts by my eulogies than others could have done by insults," he says.<sup>11</sup> One is tempted now and then to apply to Sainte-Beuve what he says of one of his rival critics: "There are in his book some very pretty touches, subtly ungracious, as if they proceeded from the tongue, or the fangs, of a woman."<sup>12</sup>

This feminine side reveals itself with a more unguarded directness under the sting of contradiction. When the friends of Madame Swetchine protest against his picture of this salon-saint, he counters by telling an anecdote, not even authentic perhaps, which he had had the good taste at first to suppress: "The aged husband of Madame Swetchine was,

<sup>11</sup> *Princesse III.*

<sup>12</sup> *NL* 3-49.

at least in his declining years, in a blank and stupid state. He had a Bréguet watch of which he was very fond, and it was his great amusement to make it ring. Madame Swetchine did not rest until she had induced him to part with it in order to mortify his spirit. The poor old man no longer knew what to do and was always mechanically seeking for his watch."<sup>13</sup>

This unreasonable susceptibility to the inevitable vexations of literary life, is the weakest point in Sainte-Beuve's armor. When it is in the ascendant, he throws to the wind all care for dignity, for amiability, and at times even for some of the more essential qualities of the gentleman. His own keen sensitiveness seems, in his vexed mood, to make him only the more alert in finding the keenly sensitive spot in others. It is distressing for the reader of his graceful tribute to Madame Récamier to find the former guest, who had been privileged during so many delightful hours to move among the enchantments of the Abbaye-aux-Bois, forgetting the claims of hospitality and even of courtesy to speak in this wise: "It is painful to controvert outright the testimony of Madame Récamier; her argument, which is that of a woman, amounts to this: 'Benjamin Constant was in love with me, therefore he was a man of sensibility.' But, in truth, that a man has been in love with a woman and has ardently desired her, and has written her a thousand things, lively, clever, and in appearance impassioned, in order to move her and to possess her, is no ground for any conclusion as to the sensibility of this man. It is not what one says *beforehand* that counts."<sup>14</sup> No doubt, Sainte-Beuve has the best of the argument, but it is perhaps even more conclusive as to the nature of his own sensibility than of that of Benjamin Constant. Sainte-Beuve is open to the same charge as he brings against Benjamin: his character also "lags behind his talent": and when he indulges this mood the reader is often compelled to lag with it. This is most exasperatingly obvious when he engages in polemics with the innumerable quill-drivers that always pester the really

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<sup>13</sup> NL 1-254 (note).

<sup>14</sup> PL 3-281.

superior writer. Sainte-Beuve does them disproportionate honor by embedding them in the amber of his page. "The spirit of this sovereign judge of the world," as Pascal says, "is not so independent that it escapes being disturbed by the first noise in his neighborhood. . . Do not be astonished if he does not reason well at present; a fly is buzzing in his ears: that is enough to render him incapable of good counsel. If you wish him to be able to find out the truth, drive away that insect that holds his reason in check, and troubles that powerful intelligence." Sainte-Beuve has condescended now and then to cross swords with adversaries who were insignificant while they lived and who were doomed in advance to die entire at the hand of time, critics like Pontmartin who lies buried deeper year by year under the pyramid of his own works, and who would long since have been utterly forgotten were he not sometimes damned audibly. Such adversaries continually sting Sainte-Beuve into utterance. He threatens, he makes reprisals, he retorts, refutes, reviles, he quarrels with a score of petty enemies on matters as petty as themselves—for example, on his colloquial employment of a present subjunctive in a funeral address! He treats such trifles with wrathful seriousness and he rattles his quiver in the faces of these pygmies like an angry Apollo. This warfare is largely carried on in what is not, all in all, a very happy feature of Sainte-Beuve's work, the polemic footnote—the basement story, as he phrases it, in which he feels free to put off the ceremony observed in the finer apartments overhead. The irate footnote is sometimes entertaining enough in its own sly or wry fashion, but it is usually too prolix and lacks the one redeeming feature of literary quarrels, the gift for repartee. These squabbles of men of letters, and the pinpricks that they give and get, sink, after a few brief years have passed, into a really monumental insignificance. There is a deficient sense of his own worth in Sainte-Beuve's sorties into the field of polemic. The cult of literature, carried to such unique perfection as it was by him, should render forever impossible such lapses from amenity. He might have learned from Goethe to administer his personality in a more serene fashion.



I do not mean to imply that Sainte-Beuve should never have answered those who attacked him. Those who would make it an invariable rule never to answer an attack are not only setting up an impractical ideal, but are refusing to take human nature into account. The device *Nemo me impune lacessit* is as salutary as it is human. Those rare individuals whose temper is so long-suffering or whose homage to their own particular Muse is so coldly impersonal that they remain unaffected by adverse opinion, may eschew all polemic and possess their souls in dignified quiescence. They probably lack the polemic vein. Theirs is a fine and, under some circumstances, a noble attitude. But for more fiery spirits, who suffer when they see a wrong done in their own persons to the cause they uphold, for such men, the occasion being a sufficiently worthy one, the personal retort to personal attack may also comport a fine and even a noble attitude.

When Balzac heaped vile abuse on Sainte-Beuve and his "Port-Royal," while at the same time heaping blunder on blunder with an incompetence as grotesque as it was charlatanic, an annihilating reply was entirely in order.\* Balzac's was a name to conjure with, and it carried a weight which unhappily did not belong to the efforts of the great novelist when he turned critic. The public has a right to be protected against imposition, even the imposition of a great name misused; and when the enemy so unguardedly delivers himself into our hands, it is time to smite with the sword. But if the enemy belong to the insignificant small fry of literature, and can be counted on of his own accord to write himself down an ass, it is futile as well as undignified to draw the sword Excalibur only to blunt its edge on such hard hide. In Homer, the donkey is driven out of the field by callow striplings armed only with cudgels. When he intrudes into the garden of literature he may well be abandoned to similar adversaries and to similar weapons.

Sainte-Beuve's ticklish literary sense, even without other provocation—and here we can sympathize a little with

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\* For this lively pass-at-arms see PR 1-548 ff.

his irascibility—now and then inspires a diatribe against the writer of a foolish book. After writing a charming essay on Terence, reflecting on every page the “well-nigh ineffable amenity” of that fine nature, Sainte-Beuve takes up a volume on one of his literary favorites, La Rochefoucauld. It was in the dog-days, and the book, it seems, was very ill-written. It lacked critical perspicacity, it lacked style, and it pretentiously flaunted hitherto unpublished documents, of no real value, in the face of the reader. It was, moreover, the production of one, Edouard Barthélemy, a pupil of Cousin. Under these canicular and other provocations, and doubtless nowise loath to be circuitously disagreeable to Cousin, Sainte-Beuve quite forgets the “well-nigh ineffable amenity” of Terence. “M. Barthélemy,” he says, “is so inoffensive, so indulgent even toward his predecessors and toward those whom he feels at times bound to contradict, that one hesitates to trouble his contentment by saying what one thinks of his work, especially when he brings us some unpublished bits of a great writer; and yet he is given to speaking of this literary master in so singular a style, he judges this profound moralist in a manner so superficial and so illogical, that one is driven to wonder what is the use of all this ardent study and worship of the seventeenth century, with all the brave reading it involves, if it avails to form neither the style, nor the judgment, nor the taste. . . Be an editor, if such is your pleasure and your pride, but be it with all the attention which this thorny task demands; and beware above all if, playing the author yourself, you expose even the tip of your ear! You tempt one to pinch it. . . The weather is fine, the season smiles, the summer is radiant and splendid, everything invites you: young man, leave these things to those whom they concern, and if you have too much leisure or too much energy, if your blood tingles, expend your zeal in some other way; go to Ems, go to Spa, and leave to us who are imprisoned in our armchairs the labor, in these August heats, of fashioning phrases. Do not imagine that I exaggerate the importance of a well-turned sentence, or of one which at any rate

falls upright on its feet; an honest man may defy grammar, but why the deuce should he feel called on to print his solecisms?"<sup>15</sup>

No one, not even a Sainte-Beuve, can be equally sympathetic to every order of merit. Sainte-Beuve holds, and rightly, that one cannot be a man of talent and character without having natural antipathies for certain men too radically different from oneself. Goethe's feeling for Pascal is a good example, or Carlyle's for Swinburne, or Voltaire's for Rousseau, "that wild beast that one should touch only with a pole between the bars of a cage." Sainte-Beuve feels, however, that there is in such profound revolutions, when too fiercely maintained, an affront to the majesty of genius. "Insult has found a footing and rears its head even among the élite of mankind. We suffer at this; we would fain unite in mutual esteem and respect all those whom we admire. As men of a common worth and loyalty at least, one involuntarily groups them in a sort of ideal Elysium, where Molière may view with a not undeserved veneration the peaceful countenance of Bossuet, where Montaigne and Pascal may contend without bitterness and without scorn. . . Yet, do we not see Arnauld, though exiled and a fugitive because of his Jansenism, applauding the violent edicts against Calvinism?—No, there is no escaping it, all these dreams of ultimate union are only poetic fancies, only a vain mirage that plays for a moment on the horizon in the mists of an indulgent imagination. In real life, and as soon as we begin to act, our antipathies revive."<sup>16</sup>

Thus a deep-seated antipathy cannot but color one's vision and slant one's version of a character a little in the direction of caricature. An antipathy bearing at first on a single point, legitimately censurable, perhaps, begets a pervasive coldness. In the *Lundis* this is strikingly illustrated in the essays on de Tocqueville.<sup>17</sup> He was a puritan of the spiritually restless, self-studying and joyless kind. This charac-

<sup>15</sup> NL 5-374.

<sup>16</sup> PR 3-309.

<sup>17</sup> NL 10-280.



ter, however excellent its fruits in conduct, is extremely distasteful to Sainte-Beuve. Virtue so watchful, so painfully tense, is to him an unpleasant spectacle. He makes it only too plain, though without actually saying so, that he considers de Tocqueville a prig. This nowise justifiable spirit runs through the whole study, and, thanks to this undue insistence on a single trait, de Tocqueville takes on a grimacing expression which annuls his dominant nobility. Sainte-Beuve's ingrained dislike of theorists reenforces this primary antipathy and leaves him equally cold in the presence of de Tocqueville's very distinguished talent. It is interesting to note that this natural antagonism came to the surface in actual life. Sainte-Beuve tells us that a certain unguarded asperity in de Tocqueville's manner had forever vetoed any familiarity of approach on his own part. The censorious will perhaps suspect that Sainte-Beuve's coldness was only the reprisal of wounded susceptibilities. But he would, in that case, hardly have himself furnished us such a clue.\*

Lively antipathies are the complement of lively sympathies. The great critic will have both—and will be on his guard against the excess of both. It is perhaps because he seems to feel either so slightly that the work of such an eminent and penetrating critic as Faguet fails to impress one more vitally. The highly sensitive man of taste is not so coolly impartial. He has shrines where he worships—and he pauses on the way to them to make mows at an occasional *bête noire*. It is only when he has a whole menagerie of these that we can call him ill-natured. Sainte-Beuve usually repairs to the shrine in the most genial humor. He brings to his author a fund of good-nature and a willingness to be pleased, if pleasure offer, without laying down in advance the conditions on which he will consent to smile. In speaking of one of those now hopelessly antiquated literary exercises which we are all of us so content to condemn out of hand on the score of their mere titles, a *Défense et Lou-*

\* A portrait in the manner of La Bruyère, in which the note of irritation and antipathy is still more prominent, even to the point of distinct bad taste, is that of Lenormant. See CL 11-414 (note).

*ange du Pou et du Ciron*, he leniently observes: "Good taste might doubtless desiderate in these pleasantries more lightness and sobriety. But, coming from such men, they have a flavor of simplicity, of innocence, of the antique, which charms us and which speaks to the heart; they suggest Lælius and Scipio frolicking together after loosening their girdles."<sup>18</sup> Sainte-Beuve also is willing to loosen his girdle—he does not tighten it like Brunetière when he encounters an author in his path.

Unlike that great Aristarch, he aspired to be a part not so much of the conscience as of the consciousness of his age, the registrar of its really worthy and significant performances. Toward its greater representatives he was exacting and sometimes severe; toward its lesser ones he was indulgent and did his best to afford them the needed appreciation and encouragement of which the slow-moving public is apt to be so chary. A not unimportant part played by him was that of now the monitor and now the sanctioner of new talents of every order. He liked to discuss, and he felt that it was an essential part of the critic's function to discuss, the books of the day "still warm from the forge." He loved to give "the first peal of bells" to salute the new talents. A few words of praise from that infallible judge constituted a patent of nobility; a few shrewd counsels sometimes determined a career. Especially was this true of the inglorious work of the minor critic, the scholar, or the professor. He followed it with a vigilant eye, and his repeated and cordial recognition of merit in these laborious fields often constituted the one golden hour, the zenith splendor of these diminutive orbs revolving in their contracted orbits. To be weighed in his scales and not to be found wanting by the perfect justice of all-judging Jove, that was the secret hope of every writer.

It was not gratified, however, without due cause. A whole library of books poured in upon the critic, and innumerable writers from the veriest poetaster up to His Imperial Majesty Napoleon III himself, by adroit flattery, by modest

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<sup>18</sup> Tableau 130.

innuendo, or by point-blank solicitation, endeavored to tease or to extort from him an article. When too pointedly urged to write an article on the "Julius Caesar" of Napoleon III, he dictated a few scathing pages *Les deux Césars*,—too scathing to be published.<sup>19</sup> When he lost patience at similar pressure from Louise Colet, he answered in this vein:

"Madame, you may think of me whatever you choose to think, and you may say and print whatever you see fit to say and print. I have but one remark to submit to you. Since the day, years ago, when I first had the honor of meeting you, and when you asked me for a Preface, until the last time that I had the honor of meeting you, when you asked me for an article, requests of this kind have always been the first matter to come up between us. I ask only one thing of you, to admire you in silence, without being obliged to explain to the public the precise point at which I cease to admire you. This is a modest request, Madame, and I cannot believe that you will insist on over-riding it. It would in any case be useless, for I have no leisure and am determined to choose for myself the subjects of my studies . . . I beg you once more, Madame, to grant me the peace which I have never violated with regard to you, and to permit me to remain a silent critic and an admirer—in the social world—of your works."<sup>20</sup>

The supreme test of a critic's temper is his treatment of his great contemporaries. Sainte-Beuve is accused of envy, partiality and spite toward nearly every one of the great writers of his day. For the profound student of human nature, books, though the richest source, are still a secondary source, a pale reflection of life itself. His final challenge and test is the living subject; he cannot consent, like the amateur, to work only with books. Sainte-Beuve developed his talent for analysis, for spiritual dissection, by continual study of his contemporaries. And as he professed to do in history, so here too he made the present explain the past. The experience he had had directly by mixing with living men furnished his standards for judging the dead.

<sup>19</sup> NL 13-461.

<sup>20</sup> Corr. 1-187.



In the judgment of the living, he experienced, as the critic needs must do, the manifold difficulties that arise from the closer relations involved. The author will tolerate only pure eulogy; the reader in turn wishes his enjoyment to be heightened by critical endorsement; while good taste demands that the critic anticipate the merciless action of time in sifting out the little that is good from the great mass of injudicious experimentation which constitutes contemporary literature in any age. In his earlier period Sainte-Beuve was himself involved in experimentation, and also felt himself more dominated by the public. He says of one of his early articles on Chateaubriand: "I have been in a very delicate situation. I have had to speak while in the lion's mouth. Although the lion was toothless, I was nevertheless much perplexed. I believe I have managed the matter and made myself understood, without offense to his majesty." If we read the article, we can hardly help feeling that the majesty of truth has not so completely escaped offense.

Sainte-Beuve felt that the criticism of contemporary writers is a special art having its own laws and modes of procedure. One must speak one's mind, but with a kind of subtle Jesuitry. This difficult exercise, he suggests, will enlarge the talent of the critic. It might seem quite as necessary to enlarge the talent of the public. Jesuitical criticism, read with a Jansenistic mind, may prove liable to misconstruction. Sometimes Sainte-Beuve meets the difficulty with triumphant ingenuity. Writing a sketch of the poet Fontanes, under the jealous eye of Fontanes' daughter, he has to explain why the poet claimed to have completed more cantos of his epic than he has transmitted to us. Instead of attributing the discrepancy to literary vanity (it seems to have been a habit with the poets of that day to arrogate a portentous literary fecundity) Sainte-Beuve says euphemistically: "In his ever smiling and lively imagination, Fontanes fancied perhaps that he had executed more cantos than he really had written."<sup>21</sup> That is the acme of grace

<sup>21</sup> PL 2-276.

and of graciousness—it is to sit smiling between truth and courtesy and to pay homage to both without alienating either.

But the problem is usually less simple, and the physiognomy of truth is less easily discernible behind the veil. Sainte-Beuve thus discusses a page of Gautier on the painter Diaz:

“Gautier might have criticized him, yet he does not; but in amorously describing his pictures, he designedly relaxes his style, he subtilizes it and so to speak combs out its fringes, he renders it more diaphanous or more coruscating than one would expect; he imparts to his own style some of these agreeable faults of the painter; he is not in the least concerned, so long as he expresses these, whether he be himself accused of sharing them.

“‘M. Diaz,’ he says, ‘lives in a little fairyland world, where all the colors are iridescent, where the rays of light penetrate a silken foliage, where every object is bathed in a golden atmosphere; the sky resembles the blue and gold of the peacock’s neck, the turf is golden brown, the earth scintillates like a jewel-casket, the textures gleam or are frayed out into dazzling fringes, etc.’

“He shows us, in a word, Diaz in his early manner; in aiming at an absolute exactitude, he mimics him, he apes him: behold, and judge! he has not deceived you. Do not go on to imagine, because of the velvety softness of his descriptive touch, that he is himself completely under the illusion. He has put before your eyes a faithful image, a marvel of miniature reproduction, emblazoned with prismatic splendors, and he leaves for you, the stern critic, the inexorable arbiter of taste, the facile honor of pronouncing, if you insist, the judgment which he has, so to speak, placed on your lips.”<sup>22</sup>

Every reader will of course feel himself able to gauge with infallible accuracy the undercurrent of restriction in such a seemingly full tide of eulogy—but is he equally sure that every other reader can do so, and that the less discern-

<sup>22</sup> NL 6-326.

ing will not be carried headlong downstream to some blissfully uncritical Elysium, where worshipful bands of admirers dance and salaam in never-ending circles around laurelled painters and poets, where all the colors are iridescent and everything is aureate and silken and scintillant, and where politeness is defecated to such pure transparency that no vestige of restrictive shadow ever tarnishes its golden splendor?

This very essay on Gautier from which I have just quoted is an example of the difficulty of writing on contemporaries, and of Sainte-Beuve's suave but sometimes elusive manner of doing so. He met Gautier continually at the Magny dinners, in the salon of the Princess Mathilde, and elsewhere. Gautier was, besides, one of the most amiable of men. According to Faguet and Scherer (who wrote under no inhibitions), he was also one of the most empty. Could Sainte-Beuve say as much? Or can we imagine that he did not think as much? His elaborate study leaves us unsettled on this and indeed on almost every other fundamental quality of Gautier's talent. His virtues seem touched too lightly, his faults more lightly still. Did not Sainte-Beuve fully realize them? Doubtless—but the essay remains vague, an edifice shining in the mist, with just a suggestion of mirage.

Sainte-Beuve is, in this problem of literary etiquette, a little too much a man of the world. He solves it by being courteous when he must and truthful when he can. But this solution is at best only a present convenience, not a permanent one—at least for a critic who is willing to evade the truth to-day but unwilling to suppress it to-morrow. Sainte-Beuve's successive attitudes toward his contemporaries are not always edifying. When the reader knows that he privately spoke of Villemain as a cringing and time-serving spirit, he may well be a little perplexed, however intelligent, to find Sainte-Beuve publicly lauding him for "that intellectual courage of which he has given so many proofs." He may well find necessary, though hardly gracious, the footnote which Sainte-Beuve subsequently appended, explaining



this eulogy as "palpably ironic." One would prefer more matter with less art—or less artifice. It is possible to go so far in eulogy that it is difficult to retreat with grace. His treatment of Soumet offers a typical example of this, and admits us, as it were, into the workshop of Sainte-Beuve. In 1841, he writes in a private letter:<sup>23</sup> "The second article of Vinet on Soumet treats him with ridiculous reverence; I am sorry for it. This Soumet is a madman and a shallowpate, a plaster-bust, *bellum caput*. His pretended success is the merest charlatanism." In 1846, as an Academician writing of an Academic session, an occasion, it is true, on which politeness is always prescribed and truth not infrequently proscribed, Sainte-Beuve speaks of Soumet as "one of the most fertile and brilliant of poets . . . a poet of genuine talent, endowed by nature with rich and rare qualities, eager for deathless glory and capable of long enterprises" (does Sainte-Beuve hint that he found Soumet's epic too long?). Can the reader bridge the chasm that separates such utterances?—even though the critic adds that the one thing wanting to the poet was perhaps in his beginnings a sound and powerful discipline that might have perfected his taste—even though he adds also that "between reality and him, there was a sort of light curtain, yet a sufficing one, through which everything easily took on the color of his dreams. He was, in a word, one of those who would not find it to their advantage, even for the sake of truth, to lay aside that flowing mantle with which he loved to drape his figures—and himself likewise."<sup>24</sup> Has Sainte-Beuve here perhaps publicly repented of his private ruthlessness? This would seem plausible if he had not later added a characteristic footnote—in which he tells us that the poet lacked ideas, that he was at every hour a comedian, an aging and unconsolated dandy who imposed on the long curls of his wig airs of adolescent luxuriance, and who had on his shelves only seven or eight books, all epic poems, culminating in his own, which, he held, replaced all those of the past and dispensed with all those of the future. Above these volumes

<sup>23</sup> Olivier 262.

<sup>24</sup> PL 3-412, 414.

a single shelf was consecrated to the lodgement of an eagle-quill, with which he was supposed to have written his poem, and which he exhibited with unsmiling solemnity—although he was withal fundamentally frivolous. The wheel has come full circle and we are once more in the presence of the *bellum caput* quite empty of ideas, of sense, of decorum, and presumably even of poetry! The Academy, it seems, was responsible for the laudatory interlude, and truth, effectually banished thence, has perforce taken refuge in a footnote—a very unacademic footnote, Sainte-Beuve sarcastically adds, but wholly true and exact. We do not doubt that, and we see nothing worse than a very mischievous humor in this little comedy of contradictions; but all these successive acts of it are perhaps necessary, if we are to be sure that we hold the truth about Soumet according to Sainte-Beuve. As he says elsewhere: “The truth is very hard to find, and, once found, is equally hard to keep.”

The authors of the past Sainte-Beuve saw, as we all must see them, chiefly in their works. The touch of time idealizes. It also disarms: we feel the human frailty of remote figures with less liveliness than those of our neighbors in time. Napoleon and Bismarck still have enemies, but who really hates Timour and Genghis Khan, or who really loves Titus, *deliciæ generis humani*? Racine and Molière had their faults, but the works only glorify the man. Sainte-Beuve's contemporaries were not only too near him for this purifying perspective, they had also, in a hitherto almost unprecedented manner, impertinently written themselves into their works. For Sainte-Beuve, even more than for later readers, these works were palimpsests in which he perpetually read beneath the ostensibly sacred text a profane one that ran flatly contradictory to it and that suggested a constant and damnatory discount from its ideal pretensions. His studies of nineteenth century authors thus represent a special type of criticism: a combination of literary analysis duly admiring of the genius and of moral analysis usually derogatory to the man. It is a type of criticism in which truth almost tyrannously insists on tak-

ing precedence of beauty and on pushing aside the hand of time that prematurely essays to paint its halo. Such criticism seems ill-natured because it is so willing to be true, and, in being true, to repeat the jarring note in nature instead of gratifying our instinctive demand that the critic should put the truth to shame by painting the artist (for art's sake) in an ideal pose.

Though it may be that Carlyle exaggerates a little in maintaining that, except the Newgate Calendar, the most sickening reading in the world is the lives of authors, still profound familiarity with them does not exactly beget respect. Sainte-Beuve saw, as much as any man, and more attentively perhaps, the seamy side of authorship and of authors. He knew many of them as well as if he had carried the key of their conscience—in some cases even better than they knew themselves, for they used it not to unlock but to lock the door. As the years slipped by, as old ties and obligations faded, as isolation increased and brought with it increase of freedom, he revised his earlier notions, discarded what they held of illusion, sometimes of half-voluntary illusion, repainted many of his portraits in a more realistic spirit, and corrected others by throwing in, here and there, a restrictive touch or a streak of shadow. And what still more lends color to the charge that something of malice lurks behind these restrictions is the change of tone. Like many over-sensitive natures, Sainte-Beuve grew more ironic as he grew older. *On se brise ou on se bronze*, as he used to quote from Chamfort. He took a sardonic pleasure in exercising his profounder science, his surgical skill now at its height; and the delight of the surgeon in operating made him a little indifferent to the quivering sensations of the living flesh he operated on, or to the feelings of the surviving friends and relatives whom he horripilated by his neat autopsy of the recent dead. That is why he sometimes seems wantonly cruel; and, indeed, in the case of most of the romanticists, nothing could be more cruel than to tell the truth. But can we expect the analyst, whose chief passion it is to draw from the premises the inevitable conclusion, to



forego the pleasure of proclaiming the truth he has discovered? Sainte-Beuve is still ready to see in the defections and errors of genius only the same weaknesses that are incident to our poor human nature at large; but he does not, as in earlier days, hide his censure under honied phrases and so temper the critical wind to the shorn poet that it shall seem only a fanning zephyr gratefully cooling the ardent brow of genius. His language is clear, sometimes painfully clear. It is very frequently painful to his victim; it is so at times to his reader. Was it never so to the critic himself? To achieve the truth was his great joy; to proclaim it was perhaps only a mixed joy at best. He seems to have felt, if we are to believe his own testimony, a certain counter-current of real regret. And why doubt this, despite the seeming contradiction of such complexity? As La Fontaine says: *Les délicats sont malheureux*. And, as Sainte-Beuve says: "It is not possible to feel the beautiful with the utmost vividness and delicacy without being terribly shocked by the bad and the ugly. Exquisite delights must be paid for."<sup>25</sup> As regards his contemporaries, he very frankly tells us what price he paid for his delight in them. "It is grievous for me to pass such harsh judgments at times on men whom I admire and whom I have known; but, if I am to exercise my profession, I can only do so honestly and in all uprightness," he writes to his intimate friend Collombet. After studying his relations with his literary fellows, it seems impossible to doubt the sincerity of these words. This doubt, however, has been entertained, and, what is stranger, it has generally prevailed.

His severity toward many of his contemporaries has been ascribed only too frequently to envy of their superior creative gifts, of their mundane triumphs and their amorous conquests. That he should have felt a deep irritation at the success, financial, political, social, academic, or purely literary, of nearly all the men of his group and of his generation is natural, and, one is tempted to add, justifiable. He published volume by volume for twenty years his literary

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<sup>25</sup> NL 8-121.

monument "Port-Royal," without a single word of recognition in any creditable journal or review. He was already nearing forty when he still saw Planche set up as his equal in criticism; he saw Nisard occupying a professorship at the *Ecole Normale*, for which he had himself asked in vain; he saw Lamartine deserting poetry for the more solid rewards of very questionable politics; he saw Hugo reaping rich returns of popularity by work in which genius and charlatanism were inextricably mingled; he saw his colleagues of the *Globe* risen to place and power with the government of Louis Philippe, yet coldly oblivious of their former collaborator; he saw himself treated as a convenience by his fellow-poets as long as he praised them, and as an inconvenience as soon as he judged them; he found himself, the intellectual superior of them all, already middle-aged, isolated, without academic honors, without real vogue or authority, a dependent, and treated as a dependent by the Cousins and Villemains who dropped him a precarious crumb or two from the ministerial table; he had lodged for twenty years in student quarters; he was still as impecunious as ever, with so little promise of a future more brilliant than his past that he even thought of emigrating to America; he held for sole favor a position as a library assistant, "a spray of cherries for the birds to peck at," and still awaited the auspicious day when the *Constitutionnel* should offer him the lucrative honorarium of a hundred and twenty-five francs apiece for his "Causeries du Lundi." That such humiliating experiences as these inclined him to scrutinize his contemporaries with a critical eye, and to treat their weaknesses without indulgence, is plausible and, moreover, it is patent. That his estimate of their writings swerved from critical probity and was spitefully derogatory is sheer conjecture. There is no good ground for assuming that Sainte-Beuve was willing on any account to risk his hard-earned reputation as the most conscientious of critics.

Far more credible, as well as more creditable, reasons may be adduced to explain his severities. He was a modest

man and as such detested vanity. He could condone it when conjoined with finer motives in the tangle of virtue and weakness that underlies men's noblest acts. "Let us not cavil at the diverse motives that prompt human action, provided it is good. Socially speaking, let us not strip the vessel of its highest sails."<sup>26</sup> But when action both began and ended in the petty circle of egotism, he was inexorable. Of literary vanity he says sarcastically: "This idolatry is of recent growth. I have seen it rise; alas! have I not myself contributed to it? Nowadays the ever-renewed eulogies that one is bound to give to the poets and even to the prose-writers in vogue, under penalty of irritating and wounding them, must be of the same order as those boundless and unqualified flatteries addressed in olden times to Asiatic satraps." One has only to read the correspondence of men like Hugo, Lamartine and Vigny to realize the truth of the indictment. Sainte-Beuve gradually came to see in vanity an attribute of human nature as elemental almost as that self-love of which it is one of the least agreeable manifestations. He found it piquant to vivify his portraits by multiplying these touches of nature that make great men kin to the rest of the world. He was in this respect a naturalist and loved to follow nature even into the obscure and curtained corners where she is only dimly descried in questionable and sometimes even in unsavory guise. He is a disciple of Bayle; but he has what his master lacked, a refined taste that only half sanctions the procedure; usually, though not always, he confines the disenchanting touch within limits. As a rule, it can give offense only to those who are fundamentally unwilling to have their gods humanized. To the stream of fervid and by no means always disinterested eulogy that hails contemporary talent as eternal genius and insignificant mediocrity as monumental wit, he opposed an ever more sane and circumspect "perscrutation of talents." "How terrible it is to live and to write among all these incarnations of self-love who straightway assume ill-will and offense if one does not fall at their feet!"<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> CL 13-95.

<sup>27</sup> *Princesse* 29.



Living on familiar terms with most of the men of letters of his time, observing them year after year through the varying phases of their course, drinking in all the comments, wicked or charitable, which their work, and still more their conduct, provoked in the public, in the press, in the *salons* and *cénacles* of the day, hearing, too, all the comments, mainly uncharitable but often terribly clairvoyant, which they made on one another, and those, usually so fatuous, which they made on themselves, it was inevitable that a critic intent on reality and truth should find enthusiasm and admiration abating and the disenchanting fact becoming more insistent. "The atrocious turpitude that I see at so near an angle, fills me with disgust and withers every ideal aspiration in my heart,"<sup>28</sup> he writes in explanation of his growingly ironic attitude. He resigned himself to seeing these literary gods in the cold gray light of reality, great geniuses indeed, but not great men and great spirits, however persuasively they might cajole their clients to believe them both. He developed—or shall I rather say, they developed in him—a unique talent for detecting the precise limit where the genius ended and the man began, where art gave way to artifice and reality to pose. How far in most cases the end was from the beginning, and with what unfriendly faces past and present stared at each other! Sainte-Beuve had begun in the rôle of the admiring critic, who writes to impart his admiration to the public: he ended in the rôle of the judicial critic, who warns the public against excess and infatuation. Of his early criticism he says: "There was in me in those years an excess of sensibility and enthusiasm, a need of admiring and idealizing every object of my worship."<sup>29</sup> How different is his tone later! "Having become, as regards both my temper and my manner, more free and more judicial, our relations gradually suffered from a kind of chill,"<sup>30</sup> he says, speaking of Vigny. He might have said as much of most of the others of his great contemporaries. A worshipful Vacquerie, who remains all

<sup>28</sup> Olivier 230.

<sup>29</sup> PC 1-135.

<sup>30</sup> PC 2-90.

his life on his knees before his chosen idol, seems more good-natured—in reality, he is only more uncritical. But all the world loves a lover. This is peculiarly true as regards criticism. Praise swells its object and seems to enrich us; censure diminishes it and seems to rob us.

Chateaubriand is the most illustrious of the great contemporaries whom Sainte-Beuve is accused of having led to the sacrifice. The motive of his cool circumspection in the presence of this literary idol may be found in a page where he opposes a quotation from the "Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe" to a letter to Fontanes.<sup>31</sup> Chateaubriand has visited Vacluse. "It deserves its reputation," he writes to his friend, "but Laura, the prude, and Petrarch, the pretentious poet, spoiled the fountain for me." On the heels of this undisguised personal impression, Sainte-Beuve quotes from the "Mémoires". "I heard in the distance the echoes of the lute of Petrarch: a solitary *canzone*, rising from the tomb, continued to cast over Vacluse the spell of its immortal melancholy." "The crime is not a great one," Sainte-Beuve adds, "but it is in this way that literature crowds out the primary truth." In the critic's treatment of Chateaubriand, truth has sometimes crowded out literature. The lover of truth will not complain. And the lover of literature will in his turn find that literature itself does not really suffer from Sainte-Beuve's divided allegiance.

Like Socrates and Plato, Sainte-Beuve is at bottom shocked that the genius of the artist, which makes him an idol, is nowise synonymous with wisdom and virtue, which alone could obviate the perils of this idolatry. He regrets that humanity should so largely entrust its guidance to those who are themselves even more in need of being guided: "The world, in literature as in everything else, bows down to those who speak loudest. Happy the world if these leaders at the same time speak true!"<sup>32</sup> To Sainte-Beuve the literature of his day seemed declamatory and false. It was impossible that he should speak without innumerable reservations of those who produced it. M. Michaut, whom no one

<sup>31</sup> CL 1-446.

<sup>32</sup> NL 11-292.

will accuse of being prejudiced in favor of Sainte-Beuve, says: "Of course he does not foolishly proceed to deny to Chateaubriand all literary value. He has the cult of art too deeply implanted not to love art even in this adversary. Sainte-Beuve grants that French literature owes to Chateaubriand a powerful impulse and direction; he admires the harmony and the rhythm of his style, his images, the magic of his invention and creation in style; he calls him a 'great poet and a great magician'; having quoted one of his fine pages, he avows without hesitation that 'in prose there is nothing beyond that'; finally, when he comes to René he intones an enthusiastic and vibrant hymn, with an emotion such that no one has ever received finer homage." But thereupon, M. Michaut complains, Sainte-Beuve makes reservations: Chateaubriand lacks surety and soundness of taste; his work is without unity; he belongs not among the great artists of the great centuries, not even among those second in beauty, but immediately after these, in short, he is an artist of the decadence—reservations, all of which critics since Sainte-Beuve's day have gone on repeating, and which are growingly ratified by posterity when it pauses to read Chateaubriand instead of the still more decadent writers who are following in his wake and are more or less remotely his disciples. One may then, I think, sympathize with Sainte-Beuve's protest when, after paying another of those glowing tributes to Chateaubriand's talent which recur so frequently in his pages, he exclaims: "After that, let light-minded, unintelligent or hypocritical judges venture to say that I attack and belittle Chateaubriand! I restore him."<sup>33</sup> M. Michaut rejoins: "Sainte-Beuve does to some extent spare Chateaubriand the writer; but as for the man, how he maltreats him!" Yet if we consider the criticism that has gathered about Chateaubriand since the publication of his autobiography, can we deny that posterity fairly concurs with Sainte-Beuve in its estimate of the man? Sainte-Beuve's tone is more personal and his judgment is more tinged with feeling—that is the main difference. Jules

<sup>33</sup> NL 2-260 (note).



Lemaître in his study of Chateaubriand also accuses Sainte-Beuve of ill-will—as who does not? Yet can any one doubt that if the great imagist in the Elysian Fields could read these rival volumes, he would find the earlier tribute infinitely more worthy, and more respectful of his genius—and even of what there was of grandeur in his personality? Sainte-Beuve, even in his opposition, treats Chateaubriand as a king in the world of letters, whose royal virtues he admires in default of more human ones. Lemaître speaks of Chateaubriand with disrespectful detachment, as if he were talking of *le bon roi Dagobert*.

Of Victor Hugo Sainte-Beuve had very personal grounds for speaking ill: he had wronged Hugo. He had other and more creditable reasons also, which were probably the only ones consciously operative. "It is," he says, "almost impossible for a critic, were he the most modest and the most pure, if he is independent and sincere, to live on peaceful terms with the reigning poet of his time: the self-love of the potentate, incessantly flattered and stimulated by his satellites, is irritated by the slightest diminution in the flow of eulogy, and he indignantly sees in silence itself an affront."<sup>34</sup> And, finally, there were purely literary reasons, as plentiful as blackberries. Sainte-Beuve spoke of Hugo always with reservations—and, in dealing with Hugo, the difficulty is not to make but to stop making them. Before they had ever met, the critic, only twenty-three years old, with astounding perspicacity, laid his finger on nearly every one of Hugo's defects: he warned him against being "strained, bizarre, antithetic, far-fetched, gigantic, and puerile."<sup>35</sup> It is not malice that speaks here; it is a Daniel come to judgment. Nor could all the splendid avatars of that Protean genius make Sainte-Beuve forget for one instant these elemental faults. Yet his latest judgment is really open to the charge not of hostility but of excess in praise. "What seems to me beyond question is that Hugo, when he sits firmly astride the lyric courser, goes farther than any one else ever did before him."<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> NL 10-80.

<sup>35</sup> Prem L 1-164ff.

<sup>36</sup> PC 1-465 (note).

As for Lamartine, Sainte-Beuve has again dilated on the weaknesses of the man, on the faults of the politician and the orator, and on the defects of the artist. But can one deny that Lamartine had invited every one of these criticisms, or that the critics since his day have repeated virtually every one of them? Sainte-Beuve exhibits, it is true, surprising variations of judgment. In his first period he is a little too much at the mercy of his impressions in dealing with types of genius closely akin to his own. Lamartine was his first love among the poets. He had far more natural liking for him than for Hugo. This enthusiasm so colors his vision that all his early criticism of Lamartine's poetry is uncritical: it is a hymn to the greater glory of the poet. His virtues are set forth with abounding sympathy, and we readily see how this seraphic singer impressed the feminine and susceptible spirits of that day, prepared by the "*Génie du Christianisme*" for his poetic version of Chateaubriand's religiosity. But these early enthusiasms, despite all the delicacy of appreciation that Sainte-Beuve reveals in them, are superficial. He prefers even to Wordsworth's visionary gleam the dilute splendor of "*Jocelyn*"—"that archipelago of poetry immersed in an ocean of holy water," as Vigny described it. Sainte-Beuve does not get beyond the preference expressed for the large open manner of the French poet as compared with the more exact vision of his English rival. He does not pause to note that nature, so finely apprehended in her essence and in her most subtle intimacies by Wordsworth, quite as constantly escapes in her plastic, and largely even in her moral, aspects through the open meshes of Lamartine's freer manner. Quite as little does Sainte-Beuve seem to have caught in Wordsworth that note of spiritual elevation by which he rises out of and far above the region of romantic nature-worship in which Lamartine is after all immured with profaner poets, even in the very hours when he beguiles his captivity with ecstatic hymns. In his unqualified acceptance of the "*Harmonies*," which he preferred even to the "*Méditations*," as some other good critics have done and still do, Sainte-Beuve failed, as every critic

does at times, to anticipate the verdict of posterity. But by not discerning in both works the limits of Lamartine's purely elegiac talent, he paved the way for mistakenly seeing a new progress and a new triumph in "Jocelyn," for seeing a greater Wordsworth where he should have seen only a more versatile Longfellow. That he should not at once have detected here a questionable prolongation of Chateaubriand and a renewal of his impossible interweaving of the roses of Cythera with the lilies of Lebanon, and that he should not have distinguished between the keenness of Wordsworth's insight into the things of the spirit and the blunted edge of Lamartine's thought, which quite fails to cut below the surface of any of the problems involved in "Jocelyn," is singular indeed in so perspicacious a critic. This creates, after the scales have fallen from his eyes, an absolute contradiction in tone when he later judges Lamartine. The attribution of this change to ill-will is only natural on the part of those who are too impatient to trace to their source the variations in Sainte-Beuve's attitude. The change in his tone toward Lamartine, after 1848 especially, is striking; it seems almost cruel. Yet, personal considerations aside, it is certainly less striking than the change in the quality and the spirit of Lamartine's work. When the Lamartine who had written the *Lac* and the *Vallon* writes the "Girondins," and "Raphaël," and "Confidences," could the critic do otherwise than contrast the new Lamartine with the old, and could he refrain from pointing out in the former the secret vein of unsoundness that was so disastrously to develop in the latter? Or could we expect that Sainte-Beuve should keep from the world the secret which Lamartine had been too careless to keep from him, namely, that whole pages of his historical works were copied word for word from unacknowledged predecessors? Or could we expect that Sainte-Beuve should withhold his conviction that Lamartine's more authentic pages mainly voice the irresponsible judgments of an historian who refuses to weigh his words or even his facts? "When a writer compares Camille Desmoulins to Fénelon, he may well be accused of



hazardous touches and hopeless lack of tact."<sup>37</sup> And yet, Lamartine remains Sainte-Beuve's favorite among the romantic poets. Though in his ironic mood he says: *Charlatan pour charlatan, je préfère Lamartine à Hugo*, he also, in a more auspicious moment, celebrates him as the author of a wholly new poetry, "of large sweep, truly intimate, abundant, elevated, and wholly divine . . . a revelation coming from a new Olympus."<sup>38</sup> That is his last word on Lamartine. Envy and detraction never, surely, even in their most genial moments, speak in that tone.

Musset is another of Sainte-Beuve's alleged victims. Sainte-Beuve is not, perhaps, sufficiently impressed by the unique passion of Musset's poetry, and by the utter pureness of his lyric note, his freedom from sophistication. His own ideal in poetry differed too much from Musset's for an absolutely cordial understanding. The intellect was in him too great a power to countenance so complete an abdication of itself as was practiced by this spoiled child of the Muses. He could not condone Musset's "contempt for all humanity and for all moral problems, his debauched airs, his flaunting indifference for everything that was not Ninette or Ninon"—a sufficiently grave indictment in any case. He felt keenly what Henry James calls "Musset's contented narrowness of horizon." Yet his praise of him is anything but ungenerous. He had in an early essay,<sup>39</sup> on the strength of the moral observations in Musset's "Confession," hailed in him a worthy disciple of La Rochefoucauld, and classed him "among the most penetrating of moralists"—coming, for once, very near to talking nonsense. And, on Musset's death, he declares him to be immortal as Sappho; he compares his verses to the golden arrows of Apollo; he finds him in his prose a successor to the light graces of Hamilton and Voltaire; and he even points out in *Namouna* a couple of hundred verses which he calls the most felicitously spirited and the most daringly inspired that French poetry has yet ventured. That is Sainte-Beuve's last word on Musset.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> CL 4-392.

<sup>38</sup> N. Corr. 214.

<sup>39</sup> PC 2-216.

<sup>40</sup> CL 13-370, 367.

For Vigny he evidently felt a personal dislike, which seems to have stood a little in the way of a full appreciation of the merits of the poet—yet Buloz, the editor of the *Revue*, reproached Sainte-Beuve with over-estimating Vigny's poetry, and some of Vigny's dearest friends found Sainte-Beuve's final article on him entirely acceptable and just. It certainly ends on no grudging note: "It is a great thing to have received the gift and the illumination at a certain hour, to have reached the starry spheres in luminous flight, though but two or three times, and to have inscribed one's name in tongues of fire among the highest, on the ideal cupola of art. Monsieur de Vigny has done this, and he has had the right to say on a given day and to repeat at his last hour the words: 'I have touched the stars with my forehead.'"<sup>41</sup>

Béranger we need not discuss: Sainte-Beuve, in common with his age, over-estimated him in much the same measure as the present age underestimates him.

Of George Sand he wrote but little, but an enthusiasm that found and extolled the genuine Virgilian note in her pastoral romances can hardly seem inadequate to a posterity that has almost ceased to read the great enchantress.

The poetry of Baudelaire is a severe test of the soundness of a critic's standards. To deny its merits altogether, as Scherer and Brunetière inclined to do, is to show oneself unjust to such minor virtues as it undeniably possesses. To treat it, on the other hand, as poetry of a really high order of merit is to be the dupe of a *mystificateur*, and to confuse the hierarchy which interposes not one but innumerable steps of descent between the region of Parnassus where a Villon or a Musset soars and the lower fringes of its base where a Baudelaire or a Verlaine laboriously creeps. Sainte-Beuve is not too austere to feel the tenuous charm of Baudelaire; but he is too wary to be the dupe even of one who is in a way a disciple of Joseph Delorme. He finds the general impression *triste*, because no image, however frightful or afflicting, has been avoided.

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<sup>41</sup> NL 6-450.

All the rest of the field of poetry having been already occupied, "you have," he writes to the poet, "chosen hell for your province and you have turned devil . . . with subtlety, with perversity, with a curious talent and an almost affected abandonment of expression; prettifying the details and refining upon the horrible, you have the air of playing with your themes, yet you have suffered . . . This poetry is the final symptom of a diseased generation . . . It is the angel that I invoke in you and that you must cultivate. If you had allowed it to intervene a little oftener, in two or three outstanding passages, it would have sufficed to bring out your thought, so that all these dreams of evil, all these obscure forms and all these anomalous concoctions of your jaded fancy might appear in their true light, as if already half dispersed and ready to flee before the dawn . . . You are too distrustful of passion: this is a theory with you. You grant too much to cleverness and ingenuity. Abandon yourself, do not fear to feel as other people do, never fear to be too commonplace—your own subtlety of expression will always suffice to distinguish you . . . I have less mind to compliment you than to scold you, and, if I were walking with you along a cliff on the seashore, though I do not aspire to play the guardian spirit, I would try to trip you up, my dear fellow, and throw you headlong into the sea, so that you, who know how to swim, might move henceforth in the bright sunshine and in the full current."<sup>42</sup>

The poetry of the "*Fleurs du Mal*" was, however, not a prelude to saner and maturer work, and the poet never came out into the sunshine and the main current. The present age seems to prefer him as he is—and as Sainte-Beuve evidently grieved to find him. Does Sainte-Beuve's judgment perhaps anticipate that of a saner age to come?

Balzac, as a personality, is not very appealing to anybody. His vanity and his vulgarity were alike immensely distasteful to Sainte-Beuve. The novelist who usurped the noble particle before his name and the critic who inherited yet dropped it before his, belonged to two different families

<sup>42</sup> CL 9-527.



of spirits. They were not born to like, not to say admire, each other. Balzac never tried; Sainte-Beuve made a very meritorious effort and achieved a very respectable measure of success. What he seems not to have sufficiently felt in Balzac, and certainly did not sufficiently emphasize, is that magical power of evocation which gives such an irresistible semblance of reality even to the most fanciful creations, and, fortifying it, that hallucinated vision of detail, which, by endless multiplication of touch on touch, so powerfully deepens the general impression—a double gift which no other novelist possesses in comparable degree, and which makes Balzac unique despite all his crying faults—which again no other novelist possesses in comparable degree. Sainte-Beuve was peculiarly sensitive to Balzac's faults. The price paid for Balzac's striking exhibitions of power seemed to him too great. It would have seemed so to Joubert likewise. For all lovers of moderation Balzac is "an over-excited spirit indulging in perpetual exaggeration." There was for Sainte-Beuve nothing more profoundly antipathetic than this. Even genius must not tamper with truth or violate the proprieties of nature—nor yet the proprieties of civilized life. Sainte-Beuve felt in Balzac, as he did in Flaubert, a surgical and clinical cruelty that was the outward sign of a painful lack of spiritual elevation; he found in his work a diffused and general cynicism often degenerating into lubricity. "Balzac has stumbled upon society in its quarter-hour of amorous undress: the tumult of the times had pushed the door of the alcove half open, and he has slipped in; but if such windfalls are precious, they should plainly not be abused nor unduly prolonged, under penalty of making the charm give place to disgust. Now, since that inauspicious hour, the door of this alcove has remained ajar, or rather, it has swung open right and left, everybody walks in and walks out, description stops at nothing; it is no longer the poet who delicately hints the mysterious rites of love, it is the indiscreet practitioner who babbles of secret maladies."<sup>43</sup> Sainte-Beuve wrote thus in the very

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<sup>43</sup> PC 2-482.

year of Balzac's vicious attack on him—and this no doubt sharpened his pen a little. Yet, a few years later, Taine, the most ardent of Balzac's worshippers and the chief founder of his reputation in France, speaks quite as unreservedly: "Balzac ventures on many a detail of secret history, not with the coolness of a physiologist, but with the glistening eyes of an epicure or a glutton who, through a half-opened door, devours with his eyes some tempting feast . . . He is repelled by no odor and no foulness; he has coarse senses." And Brunetière, one of Balzac's warmest partisans in more recent times, began by stigmatizing Balzac in even severer terms. Sainte-Beuve has thus anticipated Balzac's later critics in this charge. But he makes it central in his estimate of Balzac, and so admires him vastly less than do those critics who note this grave fault only to condone it. Does this suggest that he has more ill-will—or more taste? The latter explanation is certainly the safer one. *Sans délicatesse il n'y a pas de littérature*—at least of the highest order. The refined taste that prefers charm to magic will always hesitate in the presence of Balzac.\* And, if this be true, how refute Sainte-Beuve's conclusion: "He does not belong, and he cannot belong, to the élite of mankind"?<sup>44</sup> There are those who feel that "nothing sounder and juster has been written on Balzac than Sainte-Beuve's article of 1850,<sup>45</sup> only a few years after Balzac's outrageous diatribe against him."\*\*

If Sainte-Beuve's restrictions as to Balzac show the uncompromising trend of his taste, those he makes as to Stendhal show in a clear light his conception of what literature in a general way should be and do. "The fault of Beyle as a novelist is that he came to this kind of writing only by

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\* All Sainte-Beuve's objections to Balzac's work may be set down as the expression of offended taste. *Rancor*, if we seek it, should rather be sought in Balzac's utterances on Sainte-Beuve:

"The Muse of M. Sainte-Beuve is of the nature of the bat rather than of the eagle . . . His lax and fluid phrase, impotent and cowardly, glides alongside of the idea; it fears it; it prowls in the shadows like a jackal; it steals into historic, philosophic, and private cemeteries; it drags forth estimable corpses . . . often the bones remain stuck in its gullet."

That anyone capable of writing in this vein should mortally offend a man of taste may perhaps be set down as one of the elementary laws on which taste itself rests.

<sup>44</sup> PR 1-559.

<sup>45</sup> CL 2-443.

\*\* Irving Babbitt: *The Masters of Modern French Criticism*, p. 137.

way of criticism and with certain anterior and preconceived ideas; he did not receive from nature that broad and fecund talent of the narrator, into whose work the personages enter naturally to behave in harmony with the course of things along the lines on which they were created; he forms his personages with two or three ideas which he believes to be just ones, and above all piquant ones, and which he takes pains at every moment to recall."<sup>46</sup> Sainte-Beuve finds the hero of "*Le Rouge et le Noir*" only an "odious and impossible little monster." He finds the hero of "*La Chartreuse de Parme*" equally unsatisfactory. The novel, "lacking probability and coherency," is only "a clever Italian masquerade," full of "affectations and grimaces." "After reading such things, I long to reread some novel wholly simple and straightforward, some large and wholesome picture of human nature, in which aunts do not fall in love with their nephews, in which ecclesiastics are not as libertine and as hypocritical as Cardinal de Retz in his youth, without his redeeming wit, in which poison, lies, anonymous letters, every infamy, are not the ordinary and accepted devices, and in which, under the pretext of seeking simplicity and of shunning effect, I am not plunged into incredible complications and into a thousand labyrinths more frightful and more tortuous than those of ancient Crete."<sup>47</sup>

Such a judgment, and it concords with many another of Sainte-Beuve, suggests the essentially sane and wholesome conception of human nature that he loves to see literature reflect. To our emancipated age the attitude will seem narrow and a little puritanic—so fast have we progressed since Victorian days. To the devotees of Stendhal it will seem little short of an outrage. That it makes far too little of what is the central strand in his talent, his remarkable psychologic penetration, must be acknowledged. That Sainte-Beuve is severe, and even unfair, in calling these novels failures and in pronouncing them detestable, may also be conceded. Yet one may feel sure that, had he lived into the days of the Stendhaliens and their excessive cult,

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<sup>46</sup> CL 9-330.

<sup>47</sup> CL 9-335.



he would still have smiled sceptically at their unqualified acceptance of a genius so whimsical, so cynical, and so starkly inhuman. But let us quote by way of balancing the account a few lines in which Sainte-Beuve's impartial justice pays tribute to the undeniable flashes of insight and of divination that abound in this erratic genius: "His novels are what he succeeded in making them, but they are not commonplace; they are like his criticism, especially addressed to those of the trade; they generate ideas and open new avenues."<sup>48</sup> That compliment is not banal. And of the critic in Stendhal he says: "He has been a critic, not for the public, but for the artists, for the critics themselves."<sup>49</sup> Such recognition, coming from the greatest of critics, is a veritable accolade.

The current of cynicism that displeased Sainte-Beuve in Balzac and in Stendhal was bound to offend him in Flaubert. "I am up to the neck in 'Salammbô.' Ugh!" he writes to the Princess Mathilde. This candid expression of opinion he translates for the public into three *Lundis*,<sup>50</sup> much more polite (for Flaubert was a personal friend) but of much the same tenor. He had already hinted similar objections to "Madame Bovary." He recognizes the artistic wholeness of this work, the unrivaled fidelity of its picturing of the Norman countryside, and its structural virtues, its superior style—though he finds a certain excess in the emphatic vividness of the accessories of the drama. But he has qualms as to the spirit pervading this work, so cruelly impersonal, so clinical, so hard. He finds here the art of a new generation, one for which idealism has ceased and the lyrical inspiration has vanished. "Is all this moral or consoling?—the writer seems never to have asked this question. He has asked only one thing: Is it true? . . . And this truth is painted against a background of bitterness and irony . . . The characters, very real and very living . . . are painted with absolute precision and crudity, unsparingly . . . The reader inclines to be more indulgent than

<sup>48</sup> CL 9-340.

<sup>49</sup> CL 9-321.

<sup>50</sup> NL 4-31ff.

the author himself.<sup>51</sup> The cynical realism is pushed too far. There are details too vivid, scabrous, and of sensual suggestiveness. The author should have stopped short of them. A book, after all, is not and can never be reality itself. Not only the moralist, but the severe artist may object. The horrible end of *Madame Bovary* is inexorably painted. The brazen string is pressed till it grates on the ear. There is wanting throughout the touch of the ideal. Goodness is not represented by a single figure."<sup>52</sup> The fundamental spirit running through all these strictures is consonant with that which runs through all Sainte-Beuve's criticism—the belief that sane and sound art must have at its centre a core of idealism. And that supreme challenge Flaubert—let his admirers say what they will—cannot meet.

The variations of Sainte-Beuve's attitude toward Lamennais offer an even surer touchstone for estimating the good faith of his criticism. In reading the essay in which he breaks with Lamennais<sup>53</sup> one might perhaps suspect an unscrupulous harshness hostile to all fair play; one might infer this from the tone, so throbbing with indignant reprobation, and from the multiplied strokes with which the contrasted lights and shades of that disparate character are laid bare to our disenchanted, almost disdainful, pity. But is there not justification enough for outcry and dismay in the inexplicably sudden apostasy of the great evangelist, who, as Sainte-Beuve says, preached with fanatical conviction one doctrine one day and a wholly opposed doctrine on the morrow? Sainte-Beuve is right in demanding that one should in these circumstances expiate a first error by a decorously protracted silence as a guarantee against a second error. It is only natural that he should have expressed his disapprobation with all the vehemence of outraged good sense and of wounded feeling.

More than thirty years later, when death had long since intervened, when time had healed old wounds and answered, in its own conclusive way, the perplexing questions once

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<sup>51</sup> CL 13-348.

<sup>52</sup> CL 13-360.

<sup>53</sup> PC 1-248.

striven over with so much feeling, when Sainte-Beuve's critical faculty ruled in unchallenged supremacy and when he wrote, as he says, "without severity and without indulgence," the portrait of Lamennais is painted a last time with cool, calm fidelity, with new touches to emphasize and subtilize the likeness, but without a single fundamental change. It is plain that no grudge, no personal feeling, however real, had, either early or late, been allowed to deflect from its normal action the play of the pure intelligence. Love of truth was from the first Sainte-Beuve's ruling passion; the other passions waited upon it. He has given us what will remain a definitive portrait of "this harsh Breton, with his native asperities and his racial antipathies . . . this *maniaque de génie*."<sup>54</sup>

I am not trying here to prove that Sainte-Beuve's judgment of his contemporaries, for all its shrewdness, was always adequate. He put Béranger above Musset; he did not really distinguish Leconte de Lisle from the crowd of minor singers that surrounded him; he slightly dismissed Sully-Prudhomme's *Vase Brisé* as *une pièce tout à fait gracieuse*; and he almost confounded a masterpiece like "Madame Bovary" with an ephemeral production like Feydeau's "Fanny." But he did not transform his personal likes and dislikes, or the cajolings and the rebuffs he met with, into critical judgments. He judged the man in the author according to worldly standards, and he judged the author according to literary standards. He intermingled the two judgments as nature has mingled man and author, but he did not confound them. If we attend only to what he says of the character of his contemporaries, we may at times suspect him of malevolence; if we attend only to what he says of their talent, we might oftener suspect him of complaisance; but if we duly attend to his balanced judgment, we shall conclude that he loved the truth above all else.

Let us not be misled by a few discordant notes of mockery or of recrimination or by specious appearances of envy or ill-will. Sainte-Beuve was a man of his time and did not

<sup>54</sup> NL 1-32.



in spirit withdraw himself from the general life. He felt as his own the gain or the loss when the splendor or the derogation of genius honored or degraded art. "I am in a continual rage at the things that revolt me—but my rage is very often only a revulsion of love," he writes to Olivier.<sup>55</sup> And as regards the literature of the age, he had, he reminds us, his own personal stake in its fortunes. "In accepting this painful rôle of noting the premature halts, the falls, and the decline of so many talents that I admire, I wish all men to know that there is in me no feeling that rejoices in them. Alas! their ruin, if ruin there be, is it not mine also, as their triumph, so many times predicted, would also have been my pride and my joy? My reputation for critical sagacity was bound up with their destiny as loyal poets and respected writers; the better part of my own literary estate was embarked along with their renown, and I too find myself in great measure perishing in their shipwreck."<sup>56</sup> He was in the position of Ulysses trying to rule his unruly comrades:

ἀλλ' οὐδ' ὥς ἑτάρους ἐρρύσατο, ἱμενός περ·  
αὐτῶν γὰρ σφετέρησιν ἀτασθαλίησιν ὄλοντο·  
νήπιοι.

The elements of weakness, of falsity, and of decay, so increasingly offensive in the literature of the time, alienated him. "It is truly grievous," he writes, "to be so well aware of the secret, and to see the reverse side of the tapestry laid bare. Even when one does not see the defect, one is tempted henceforth to shake the magnificent fabric and to say: 'There is emptiness here.' And this one might nearly always say, without fear of going wrong, in reading the most magnificent passages of the writers of our time. On the other hand, never does one feel more impressed by the plenitude of things than when one takes in hand the great writings of the age of Louis XIV."<sup>57</sup> For Sainte-Beuve's secession from the romanticists, for his diminishing sympathy with their ideals, for his disaffected and questioning attitude toward so much of the literature of his day, there is one mo-

<sup>55</sup> Olivier 227.

<sup>56</sup> PC 1-374.

<sup>57</sup> Chat. 1-316.

tive, and that of a kind which does honor to his head and to his heart alike, a motive that would alone have sufficed; that motive is the growingly classic soundness of his taste. Even if the whole explanation of his variations and his metamorphoses does not lie here, all other motives are subsidiary and slight in comparison. To dwell, save in passing, on any less worthy and less truly literary ones is to show oneself unfaithful to the high ideal of criticism which he preached—and also practiced.

He counted his day well spent when he had returned once again to the reading of his Homer in the Greek text, of his Virgil or his Horace in the Latin. *Decies repetita placebit*. And he could not carry over the vision of the antique symmetry, the stability of thought and the sustained perfection of form that he found here, into the reading of the writers of his own day without feeling the vastness of the abyss that separates the ancients and the moderns:

“What is contrary [to the Virgilian ideal] is found in many of the things that surround us, marks and symptoms of literatures that have grown old, rich still and fertile but at the same time curious of novelty and jaded to excess; it is found in everything shrill-toned, in all our jarring and crying colors, in our style and our thought, in the observation and description of external objects, in our pretended discoveries and our endless analyses of human nature which violently displace its centre and upset its equilibrium. Great talents are compatible with these faults, nay, they live in them, glory in them and adorn themselves with them, they exult in them as new beauties and conquests. I do not like, unless I am forced to do so, to speak of the productions of the day; not that I do not esteem them or do not admire very often all that they exhibit of animation, of lively and abundant invention, of fertile renewal, of clever and rapid workmanship, designed for interest and diversion, and for holding, if only through a passing hour, the attention of a public ever more exigent and preoccupied . . . I have sometimes wondered what one of those extraordinary, fabulous, and in part monstrous creatures who are compounded of the

god and the beast, one of those Titans who wished to scale the heavens and whom Jupiter struck with his thunder; or that Enceladus, who made Etna boil over and all Sicily tremble when he stirred; or that Cyclops, the cousin of the Titans and a giant himself, that Polyphemus who, in his youth at least, had played so skilfully on the flute;\* . . . one of those beings, in a word, who are at once above and below humanity (and, let us beware! this creature we may very easily be ourselves, if we have not received from Heaven the most happy balance of gifts, and if we carelessly let ourselves go),—I have, then, wondered what would result if one of these beings, demons or genii, taking on the garb of civilization, were to be suddenly endowed with talent, with the talent for writing, and were to compose books, poems, novels, etc.; if this being had learned, too, all the uses to which one can put that little manual instrument, the pen. Ye gods! What astounding things we should behold! What wonders at first sight! What marvels of force! What miracles of skill! What penetration! It would suffice at times to turn one's head! But it is only too plain, and I need scarcely complete my thought: beside these gigantic portents of talent, or these prodigal splendors of color and these magnificent tissues, or these unending and subtile inductions into the refinements of feeling, or these moving and surprising inventions, how many catastrophes, and to say all, how many defiling stains! For in default of a humane taste there is no security: beside a show of beauty, a suggestion of charm, or grandeur, or emotion, there rises suddenly into sight some enormity, there drops on your head some boulder, some crudity revolts you, in a word, there is some affront to delicacy. Oh! never in Virgil, never in a genius born into this noble family, in a talent nourished by this classic reading and profoundly imbued with it, never will you have to fear such misadventures, such sudden and shameful lapses, which (I speak for myself at least) corrupt all pleasure and freeze at the very source the joy of admiration."<sup>58</sup>

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\* An evident allusion to Victor Hugo, whom Sainte-Beuve, in private, was fond of conceiving as a Cyclops, a Polyphemus, and a Titan.

<sup>58</sup> Virgile 103ff.



### XIII

## STYLE

After all, the chief stimulus of good style is to possess a full, rich, complex matter to grapple with.

—*Pater*

To discuss the style of a critic as one would discuss the style of a creative writer, might, in dealing with almost any literature other than the French, seem labor lost. But French, the most artistic of languages and the most perfect instrument for the expression of our modern culture, is so permeated by the literary tradition that one may well talk of the style not only of a critic, but of a savant, of a scientist, on occasion even of a grammarian. The French sentence has this unique quality: it seems to be cut into literary lengths, just as the German sentence comes by the bolt, while the English sentence, having a German mother and a French father, alternates, in accordance with Mendelian law, between form and formlessness. The French critic not only judges better than we do, he writes far better; he feels that in order to judge art one must be something of an artist oneself. Sainte-Beuve fulfils this condition. He is, moreover, as a critic, intensely interested in the whole question of style, and is inexhaustible in observations on this theme. For every important writer that he takes up, he has something as new and significant to say on the manner as on the matter. He is the greatest professor of rhetoric that any people has ever had. Only the French, perhaps, could have produced such a consummate critic of style; they add to the glory of being the greatest modern artists in this field, that of possessing the supreme oracle on this most intricate of all the arts.

The hazardous dictum that the style is the index of the man holds good at any rate for Sainte-Beuve. His intellectual itinerary might be reconstructed from the successive

phases of his style. At first, yielding to the romantic impulse, he cultivates ornament and image in a somewhat poetized prose; as time passes, partly through the maturing of a more classic sense of form and a keener feeling for what is simple and natural, and partly through the pressure of unremitting and hurried production, he writes in an ever more direct, free, and unaffected manner, always more adequate and always more content with mere adequacy.

He is of all critics the one who has done most to popularize his art, to make criticism readable. With him it definitely ceases to be a specialty for specialists, and invites the reader on the same terms as a novel or a poem. The last trace of technicality has vanished; criticism is become as human as literature itself, all amiability and amenity, a delightful and informal conversation in which letters and life so intimately overlap that they seem indistinguishable. In criticising Sainte-Beuve's manner, one should never forget that life—and liveliness—were his prime concern; the more specific data of criticism had to be accommodated to this demand, and sometimes suffered a curtailment that may be deprecated by more stern and thorough-going practitioners. Criticism is treated here as an art, and as such its aim is to charm almost as much as to edify. The theorist may proclaim the sovereignty of reason and the supremacy of fact,—Sainte-Beuve recognizes that reason and fact do not govern the world, and that man must usually be lured into acceptance of either by an added grace: "It is the nature of man. To believe that the common people love golden speech less than does the polite world is an error . . . Men, even in matters of the gravest concern, ask to be seduced, charmed, and carried away, even more than to be set right and convinced."<sup>1</sup> And he adds that the Greek and Roman orators were often only brilliant or generous weavers of spells. This may be a scandal to the rational principle in man—but it is the basis of all the arts.

Following this universal law, style, to have all its effect, requires a little complicity on the part of the reader: he

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<sup>1</sup> CL 5-199.

must be induced to lend himself to the illusory spell. The great question is how this is best woven. The omnipresent contest between nature and culture reappears once more. Courier, himself a great artist in style, insisted that the "least little woman" in the seventeenth century wrote more gracefully than the greatest writers of his own day. She wrote as she spoke: it was pure nature. Yet the implied theory, which sets up utter naturalness as the sufficing law of style, if too rigidly applied, may be hostile to that art by which nature requires to be reenforced, and by which woman (the seventeenth century being now past) is especially inclined to reenforce nature, both in life and in literature. The partisan of pure naturalness inclines to view the charms that expression adds to thought with a questioning distrust, with a monastic prejudice suspicious of feminine wiles. The little heightening which art demands he finds unnatural. Even in the seventeenth century the least little woman did not speak with the flame of Pascal—and she eschewed imaginative flights and metaphorical splendors not from love of nature but from lack of art; she admired them in Bossuet, though she wisely refrained from imitating what she admired. From this worship of prudence came the superstition of abstinence. Style, as classicism dwindled into pseudo-classicism, was dowered, like Harpagon's bride, with all the vices it did not possess: it wore no questionable ornaments, because it wore no ornaments whatever; and it could not be accused of artificially enhancing its charms since it prudishly refused to be charming. In its best form, it was inclined to be somewhat coldly correct; in its degenerate form, it handled the delicate blossoms of poetry with a bald and puristic unconcern, and was as austere incorruptible as a donkey trundling a ton of baled rose-leaves to the perfumer's shop.

Sainte-Beuve has at times a touch of Plato's suspicion of the artist who overlays the truth with the glamour of poetry; he seems inclined to confound utility with beauty and to set up the merely exact and truthful style as the most adequate one. "We must resign ourselves to it, we writers and



men of letters; every clever man who has a specialty, if he has occasion to write about it for the public, will without more ado surpass us even in the matter of expression: he commands a more appropriate vocabulary drawn from the very entrails of the subject."<sup>2</sup> That is a consummation devoutly to be wished, but Sainte-Beuve overlooks the all-important truth that the art of expression is itself a specialty. The underlying motive for this distrust of the conscious cult of style is of course the fear that style itself shall suffer, that culture shall supersede nature. This leads Sainte-Beuve to repeat the heresy noted in *Courier*.

"Writers are experts and craftsmen; some are too studied, some are innovators, others are academic; they have their systems and their artistic devices; they have their special interests and exaggerated enthusiasms; they sometimes contribute to the progress of the language, but likewise they overstrain and dislocate it. Meanwhile, some old women, sitting quietly in their own room, speak French ravishingly, familiarly, outspokenly, as if to the manner born, without saying *by your leave* to anyone, and quite like the old women at Athens."

The ancients did not always speak so flatteringly of their old women—even at Athens. The passage shows, however, what was for Sainte-Beuve the one indispensable virtue of style, naturalness, which in its highest form is Atticism. That is the virtue which he himself achieved more and more as he matured, and in which he is perhaps unrivaled among French critics. That he was by no means insensitive to the other, and even to the opposed, virtues of style, he makes all in all abundantly evident.

Style covers the whole range between the two extremes of personality and impersonality. There is the style of the academic and professional writer who has acquired his art, a style at its best all scruple and circumspect elegance, consulting always the graces and proprieties of speech and shunning the irregularities and the audacities due to the perilous influence of reality reproduced at first hand. It is

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<sup>2</sup> NL 9-64.

the *style livresque*, the bookish style of which Montaigne, coming too early to see its supreme triumphs, speaks a little disdainfully. At the other extreme is the style which belongs to the born writer who has come into the world provided with a language of his own, whose manner of writing derives from inner impulse and is moulded not on models but on an imperious personality of which it reflects all the characteristic contours, the outcroppings and the depressions, reproducing the man in his habit as he lived, the style of a Montaigne or of a Saint-Simon.

Sainte-Beuve, as usual, is to be found in neither extreme; he gravitates by degrees from a position near the former to a position a trifle nearer to the latter. His early manner is rather bookish and betrays effort and literary intention; it is a little over-refined, subtilized, and fine-spun; it runs over into the poetical, and, even when most excellently literary, it is without much originality. It wears too long and trailing a garment; the thought is entangled in its folds. The style flows, but it also overflows. It presupposes too much leisure on the part of the reader. Sainte-Beuve had abundant talent for the straightforward, rapid, communicative style; he had not enough for the elaborate and manifold style which he at first cultivated.\* It decidedly lacks the steady forward movement, even at the cost of palpable curtailments, that marks his later work.

This early manner savors a little of the study and its confined horizons, a little also of the *salon* and the fair preceptresses that hold sway in its debilitating atmosphere. There is a recurrent note of excess, a hectic redundancy of sentiment not truly natural and freshly poetic; the flame of genuine passion is wanting. The effect is too flowery, too dulcet, too distilled. The impression is ambiguous and not wholly agreeable; the sentiment shows pale through its romantic coloring, carrying with it a suggestion of the close perfume of the hot-house. There is too much that savors

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\* Occasional essays, such as that on the Abbé Prévost (PL 1-256), are something of an ordeal for the reader's patience. So are the elaborate *entrées en matière* of many of the early essays.

of the rhetorical methods of the schools in such a typical passage as this:

"Revolutions pass over the nations and make kings fall like the heads of poppies; sciences increase and multiply; philosophies decay; and yet the slightest pearl that has once issued from the brain of man, if time and the barbarians have not lost it in their passage, still shines as pure to-day as at the hour of its birth. We may discover to-morrow all Egypt and all India, read in the heart of antique religions or fashion new ones, yet the ode of Horace to Lycoris will remain undimmed, it is one of these pearls of which we speak. Learning, philosophy, religion are arrayed alongside of it, with their profundities and their abysses, often so unfathomable, but what of that? The glistening pearl, once formed, is seen shining on the top of its rock, dominating this restless and ever shifting ocean, more humid, more crystalline, more radiant in the sunshine after every tempest."<sup>3</sup>

That is, if you will, very pretty writing; it is certainly very romantic writing—it has a decided touch of romantic excess.

As an admirer of Chateaubriand and as an intimate friend of Hugo, the two men who poured more images into literature than all the ages had done before them and who threatened almost to make literature and imagery identical, Sainte-Beuve could not fail to learn all the beauty and all the power of this great romantic device. That he used the image gratuitously as well as spontaneously is not to be denied. In an age when imagery was the only wear, this was inevitable. His images are often felicitous as literary ornaments, because they are used with delicate tact and taste; they have intellectual value as compends of his thought. But they are sometimes over-emphasized and over-elaborate. He sums up the whole drift of "*Volupté*" in the recurrent image of the limpid lake and the "absurd rock," which metaphorically typify the husband and wife that stand in the centre of the hero's amorous career. It

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<sup>3</sup> PL 1-240.



is none the less true that, when time had corrected this tendency to excess, the figures, far commoner always in Sainte-Beuve than in other critics, remain those of an artist and a man of letters, whose thought gains, but within limits, by imaginative transposition. In his soberest style, he enlivens his movement by a dash of color or by an apposite conceit; even that favorite romantic artifice, the apostrophe, is by no means ruled out. The driest of facts may take on a metaphoric garb. For example, in the survival of the Latin word (as every schoolboy knows) the accented syllable becomes in French the final one. Such a purely scientific notion might seem to defy the imagist. Sainte-Beuve says: "The accented syllable survived and was as it were the jutting rock of each word; to this one clung as one could; the remaining syllables went downstream, like soft earth in an inundation. This essential part becomes an etymological index, and serves as a guiding thread, or as a life-line in the wreck of the Latin word."<sup>4</sup> Fontenelle could not be more ingenious. Nor could anyone more happily and at the same time more grandly characterize Bossuet than in this splendid figure: "Bossuet is only the most magnificent of seafaring vessels, moving under full sail on the surface of the deep; and even the tempests, in dashing him into the abysses or lifting him suddenly up to the heavens, will never propel him into any unknown ocean or bear him on to the discovery of any yet unknown land."<sup>5</sup> The figurative expressions become, as time passes, more subdued, and the metaphor becomes more and more the servant of the idea; the thought no longer swerves from its path to make way for it; we have gravitated from the romantic to the classic metaphor. In a study of Michelet, in which Sainte-Beuve has with infinite delicacy of touch laid bare the vulnerable sides of this adventurous genius, he reenforces the total impression by a sly allusion to the most irritating and the most suspect of all Michelet's weaknesses:

"He shows, it seems to me, more and more preoccupation with sexual matters, and indulges in too many sensuous

<sup>4</sup>NL 5-241.

<sup>5</sup>NL 2-342.

allusions. One is really puzzled to reconcile these wanton imaginations with his many generous accents and his heart-felt utterances that are so profoundly personal and that appeal to our serious sympathies. Can it be that those who have never known any genuinely youthful season are more exposed than others to these retarded blooms and these autumnal efflorescences? There is in M. Michelet's work a wild vine that continually thrusts its tendrils under our eyes. You who are familiar with the art and even the caricature of antiquity, have you never seen a group of this kind: a laughing Faun peeping over the shoulder and into the very bosom of Clio?"<sup>6</sup>

There we have criticism, satire, and metaphor all in one—a Parthian arrow none the less deadly because it is discharged with such lightness of spirit. The fact that these frequent figures fit on the whole so gracefully into the texture of the style is proof enough that Sainte-Beuve has avoided, and with altogether unique success, the dry and abstract manner which is the constant menace in critical writing. He remains realistic and near to nature, and the living forces in which literature has its origins speak through his criticism undisguised and undiminished, often more tellingly than in the creations of those he criticizes. Behind his images there exists a very real power of imagination; he relives the life and revisits the scenes that he is describing. It is in this genuinely creative vein of his prose that Sainte-Beuve is a true poet. How pale his verse beside a page like this:

"If study offers indeed sweet satisfactions that have been again and again extolled, it was granted to Monsieur Magnin to enjoy and relish them in such auspicious surroundings that these deserve to be recalled and described. In the heart of the greatest library in the world, and lodged in the buildings that adjoin it, he could, at the hours when the public was absent, or in the reserved precincts from which it was excluded, consider himself as abiding in the most spacious and silent of cloisters. Seeing him pass

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<sup>6</sup> NL 2-155.

through these great halls and steal furtively with short and measured steps between the sombre shelves and the grated cases, one almost fancied that he was afraid of making a noise himself and of awakening the echoes of so many generations of sleeping authors: he seemed to be one of them, a little belated, a friend who, even when he came to consult them, wished to disturb as little as possible their repose. I have sometimes followed, or, better yet, surprised him there in the course of his peaceful researches; all was still, the day was dying, he was alone, reading near a window; the sound of the leaves rustling beneath his fingers recalled those mysterious crackling noises which, in the cold and silent mansions of the dead, alone mark at intervals the laborious transit of time. It is hard to conceive, and in a few years it will be impossible to conceive, the Royal Library as it was in its first tranquil beauty, with the haunting gloom of its rectangular court, with its austere garden, shut in by a grating and occupying half the space, a garden to which nobody had access, with its basin of greenish stone in the middle, from which issued painfully a slender jet of water; then the solemn staircases, the ancient halls and galleries of that handsome old Mazarin palace, still preserved almost as it was in the days when the great Cardinal promenaded there, or had himself wheeled around, though already nearly moribund, through those magnificent double rows of masterpieces. You had only to enter, and at once the cult and the genius of grave and studious pursuits became potent over you; the air was no longer that of the outside world; the very light took on a uniform and monotonous hue."<sup>7</sup> There is an inspiration here akin to that of Addison or Lamb wandering through the solemn aisles of the Abbey—the critic has turned poet.

Sainte-Beuve's later style, though for the most part the fruit of hasty improvisation, is more truly personal than the more elaborate manner of his early days. It is less consciously scrupulous, less adorned and ceremonious; it rises and falls with the matter in hand; it is often charmingly

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<sup>7</sup> NL 5-476.



negligent and unpretendingly familiar. When occasion favors, it has decided spirit and animation and momentarily achieves bold and vigorous effects. It has become masculine and positive. Its frequent vigor almost equals its constant delicacy, and when they combine we get pages so subtle and so true that we recognize the stamp of a genuine master in his kind.

Such pages are of course exceptional in these rapid improvisations—and who, since Voltaire, has had his gift always in hand through sixty volumes? We must remember that Sainte-Beuve was a writer wearing the uniform of the journalist and trailing the heavy chain of the *feuilleton*. For all that, he retained such native alacrity of spirit, and achieved such fine balance of grace and gravity conjoined, as to be equal to the expression of every subtlest shading of sensuous impression, and of every variety of thought and feeling. These later qualities in Sainte-Beuve's prose more than make up for the diminution of that poetic warmth which, as a rule, is only to be found while youth still lends its magic to sensation and still wields the pen.

Yet his style is not at any period as boldly personal as that of the greater masters. His personality is itself not of the bold and commanding kind that dictates style. Instead of sharp angles and accidents, his expression is all sinuous curves and circling graces that for the most part mask the energy of his thought. There is no wanton display and no useless expenditure of force; it is adequate, often abundant, never superfluous and unrestrained. Expression moves pretty regularly in the middle region where the extremes of the personal and the impersonal, the academic and the individualistic styles are as far as possible reconciled; the ideal is plainly a fusion of the two and the achievement of a pervading Attic grace and urbanity. The aim is to flatter agreeably the personality of the reader rather than to express without compromise that of the writer. It is a victory of taste, but with a little complicity on the part of nature. As in the case of Racine, the victory seems to come a little too easily. The style, even at its best, is a little more urbane

than personal, a little more graceful than original. Sainte-Beuve is not a prose writer of the first order of greatness, not a unique talent moving with sustained power on some high level that he holds in fee as his own. He says things competently rather than strikingly. He does not write forever memorable or monumental pages; he does not say things that live by the sheer infusion of the magic of genius; he is not unique in any shining quality. He has performed no feat of style quite comparable to Arnold's or to Hazlitt's essays. He has few epigrams and witty sallies, few pointed sentences, and those not very pointed, more irony than humor, and he has little tendency therefore to emphasize the less serious sides of things though they are often lightly touched in passing. On the whole there is evident an exceedingly discreet and modest personality, which only shines as it were in spite of itself. Sainte-Beuve does not coin phrases—one of the surest marks of inborn talent. Even his most personal utterances are not intensely personal or irresistibly eloquent. We remember what he says, we forget how he says it. This may be the perfection of the critical style in general. Yet even here the genuinely creative touch has its place. The epithet that clings, the phrase that gilds or that brands, is invaluable in the economy of art. The nugget and the nutshell are often supreme intellectual conveniences, and the one immortal word that summarizes a whole argument and often saves a long disquisition from oblivion (or sometimes spares the reader the labor of reading it) is precious indeed. The few such that Sainte-Beuve offers (for his work is not altogether without them) stand out like beacon-lights in his pages: "Chateaubriand is an Epicurean with a Catholic imagination," or, "Chateaubriand has removed the capital of French prose from Rome to Byzantium,"—those are striking examples of this kind of coinage. Such felicities are not the mere treasure-trove of imagination—they are found only after traveling to the extreme end of a complex train of thought and then condensing the whole of it into a miraculously simple phrase. Such feats of expression dif-

fer absolutely from the vivacities and sallies of a nimble wit like Lemaître, so gifted in that lower order of expression where felicities lie thick strewn along the main traveled road (for those keen enough to spy them)—and oftentimes beguile the critic at the expense of that seriousness which is central in criticism and from which Sainte-Beuve never wantonly departs.

Sainte-Beuve's studies depend for their effect on the solidity of their content, on the richness and exactness of the informing detail, on the persuasiveness of his multiplied touches, each giving a just perceptible deepening to the impression. They owe their power to the absence rather than to the presence of rhetoric. There is very little of studied arrangement, of massive architecture; the movement is negligent and almost haphazard, a matter of chronologic sequence as often as not; his writing seems in general casual and delightfully unpretentious. The *Causeries* are not so much literary essays as informal monologues, such as we might imagine spoken by Gray to a few choice spirits in his studious cloister at Pembroke. They are not exactly literature in the old-fashioned sense: they are not leisurely productions, slowly shaped to beauty and clothed for immortality in the choicest vestment of words severely ordered and exquisitely harmonic. They are journalistic in scope, the offspring of the hour, improvised with marvellous talent. They belong, in the author's intention, in the interval between journalism and literature—but many a page, many an article, do honor to literature quite as splendidly as the less ambitious ones do honor to that journalism which in France has been the not altogether unworthy ante-room to literature, and sometimes, in its most auspicious moments, an alert and active rival.



## XIV

### THE RELIGION OF LETTERS

He hath from his childhood conversed with books and bookmen; and always being where the frankincense of the temple was offered, there must be some perfume remaining about him.

—*Fuller*

Like so many of the great men of his age, Sainte-Beuve was open to the charge which Margaret brought against Faust, that of having no religion. He contented himself as he could with what has been called the religion of letters, just as Flaubert attempted to elude the ennui of existence by his somewhat inhuman religion of art. This cannot in Sainte-Beuve's case be set down as mere dilettantism. It was rather a form of humanism, not of the most exalted but at any rate of an exquisitely refined and intellectual sort.

There are certain things of which Sainte-Beuve always speaks with unction; these are the articles of his religion of letters: taste, good sense, learning (lightly held), urbanity, and virtue of the gentle and unpretending order, *humanitas*. Of such things he always speaks with fervor, although he pleads no cause, trumpets no conviction, and finds a saving grace in detachment. Of militant enthusiasm he has none, of austere and heroic morality he has little: the man of action may weigh him and find him wanting. It is not that he has any trace of the fatuous tendency of the artist—witness Flaubert—to depreciate the man of action. His triumphant good sense repudiates all class feeling; he is too reasonable not to recognize that society is a complex organism to whose harmonious working all members must contribute. Literature, although he loved it above all else, is decidedly relegated to its place (too decidedly, even) in such a typical passage as this:

"Society does well to honor such men as these [he is speaking of military heroes], to raise statues to them; for

it is through them in great part that it exists and subsists; they are the pillars and supports of the edifice; others supply the arabesques and ornaments. Let all of us who love, who loved especially in our youth, to play the part of butterflies or of bees, let us ask ourselves how many such men society requires in order that others may abandon themselves undisturbed to all their fantasies, their amiable reveries (I speak of these only), and their poetic caprices."<sup>1</sup>

Thus reasonably held, the religion of letters is in no danger, however ardently practiced, of degenerating into fanaticism. Yet, within this sacred pale, Sainte-Beuve's devotion is genuine and even exemplary. It is, to be sure, so evenly diffused through his whole work, and is so exquisitely refined and subdued to the exigencies of his taste, that it finds few opportunities for standing out in very bold relief. It is as delicate in its utterance as in its essence. But it gives tone and accent to all his writing. Take for an example of this fervor in its higher range the essays on Littré. They repose entire on a double enthusiasm, profoundly felt and eloquently expressed, for the scholar and the saint that Sainte-Beuve found united in this positivist, so unimportant as a writer yet so significant in Sainte-Beuve's eyes for his learning and his virtues. The very frequency of the word *noble* in Sainte-Beuve's pages—a word somewhat rare among the romantic group—is a testimony to his preoccupation with the higher order of ideas and feelings.

Within its restricted limits this religion of letters has on Sainte-Beuve something of a purifying influence: he sets a finer and a higher standard for literature than almost any of his contemporaries, and in his best moods he complies with that fundamental and most vital requirement of all religions: he gets himself out of the way, makes himself a channel for the stream of light to flow through. His volumes on Port-Royal are a unique moral, as well as intellectual, achievement. He is the high priest of literature, because he has more than any one else the combination of qualities be-

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<sup>1</sup> CL 13-344.

longing to this office: his rivals are but the deacons, the sacristans, and the beadles who serve in the temple of art. Just as Buffon always wrote with his lace cuffs on (and wrote all the better for this prelatie pomp), so Sainte-Beuve usually approaches—and quits—his *Causeries* with a certain high-priestly unction, with, as it were, a lingering odor of incense clinging to him. To the irreverent this might almost seem a mannerism; in truth, it is the sign of his vocation, the mark of a genuine fore-ordination.\* Who, for example, ever celebrated the mystery of genius with a more sacred awe than Sainte-Beuve—in his moods of fervor? Speaking of the profound difference, the sudden and unfathomable abyss, that separates the man of real genius from the merely clever talents that surround him, he says:

“There is a moment when invention, creation in any field, what we call genius or heroism, makes its appearance; men instinctively recognize this; they bow down in admiring salutation. Where yesterday there was nothing, on the morrow there is a world: whether this world be that of Shakespeare or of Homer, of Molière or of Aristophanes, of Sophocles or of Corneille, of Archimedes or of Pascal; whether it be in the realm of action the series of great exploits performed by some hero, or those other public benefactions that flow from a great law-giver and sage, matters not; the mediocrity of the many, accumulating its efforts little by little for many years, could never have achieved this; all the ingenious Marivaux, each laboring in his own way, all the men of distinction and ability, all the middling great, as Marivaux himself terms them, might pile pebble upon pebble for centuries in order to climb and lift themselves by concerted effort into this superior sphere, they could never compass their end: it is faculties, distinct and sovereign each in its kind, gifts of nature and of Heaven, which predestine and consecrate certain happy mortals to play the part, always easy for them, of enchanters of humanity and of valiant leaders and guides.”<sup>2</sup>

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\* In his *Portraits littéraires* this ceremonial inception is even a bit prolix. Later Sainte-Beuve learned to concentrate his zeal.

<sup>2</sup> CL 9-346.



Newton had defined genius as endless patience, Sainte-Beuve restores the balance by proclaiming that endless patience is not genius.

Coming down to a more familiar plane, Sainte-Beuve's religion of letters has its ceremonies, its observances, its little superstitions. Not unpleasing features of this cult, in its more epicurean phases, are the enthusiasm for old authors, the love for old folios and other bibliographic rarities, the sacerdotal rites, the fumes and the incense with which Sainte-Beuve pays homage to these sacramental things. He loves to stop by the wayside to gather a bouquet of fragrant reminiscences to adorn his discourse, he loves to range through the whole past to find shining illustrations of his theme; he loves to indulge in casual homilies on the virtues of temper and of practice that make letters a comfort, a cordial, and an ornament in life. In an essay on Madame de Verdelin,<sup>3</sup> that devoted friend of Rousseau, he pauses to enumerate the long line of feminine admirers of great men, from Aspasia and Leontium (and Mary Magdalen) down to his own age—and finally even to catalogue a long series of Frenchmen who had to forego such tender worship! There is in all this a tincture of romance, an amiable and licit extravagance that one does not find and cannot even imagine in a soberer critic, like Arnold for example, in whom the religion of letters, not less real, is a little less fervid, less bibliolatric and thuriferous, and remains confined to the venerable articles of his literary creed, without overflowing upon the instruments and utensils of its service and into the atmosphere of the chapel. In most men such restraint would indicate a more sage and lucid self-possession; in Sainte-Beuve these amiable ecstasies and Elysian ravishments attest a more opulent endowment. But instead of describing this side-chapel in the temple, let us enter it and behold the ministrant in person celebrating his rites with hieratic unction. Sainte-Beuve is discussing the invasion of the popular and democratic spirit in literature and the calling in from the highways and byways of the

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<sup>3</sup> NL 9-387.

many-headed multitude to participate in what were once its select and aristocratic joys:

"This feeling is bound up with another and more general one, the feeling which every antiquarian and every lover of the past cherishes for the favorite object of his cult, in that secluded corner of the past where his study, his sympathetic and pious research, has made him at home, which holds a portion of his imagination and of his heart, and into which he would like to invite those alone who can wholly appreciate and comprehend it. But what can we do? The age moves on its way, the highways are extending, the streets are widened, the avenues open everywhere. Yes, presently all men will pass before this ruin, before this chapel with its secret altar, before this wild and mysterious spot of which we almost alone knew the pathways and whose charms we had been among the first to recognize. Those who are indifferent to it will henceforth judge it with the rest. The old books will fare like the old cloisters that have fallen into decay, like everything that was once the apanage and the cult of the few. Let us learn to keep this religion alive in ourselves, even though the profane many are more and more indiscriminately admitted into the sanctuary. Let us, antiquarians and amateurs of every kind, let us resign ourselves, in our beloved pursuits, to suffer the intrusive and flitting apparitions of the idly curious and the indifferent. Why should we lament at this in our age of free and universal access to all things, when we see not only pilgrims and worshippers but restless idlers and tourists annually flooding even Jerusalem itself?"<sup>4</sup>

It is this gracious gift of lending himself with sympathetic insight to so many sources of inspiration, old and new, that makes Sainte-Beuve the great initiator into literature. This universality of sympathy is, in the things of the mind, the analogue of charity in the moral world. Boileau tells us that he was already at the age of fifteen filled with hatred for a foolish book. Sainte-Beuve seems never to be bored by any book; even in the least inspired he finds oases

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<sup>4</sup> CL 9-141.

and makes a pleasant sojourn there. And when there are none, he contrives to tap some secret well-spring of delight in his own rich domain of memories and inventions, he contrives to read magically between the dull lines and to supply the illumination and the amenity which the writer missed. "Let us open the *Journal of Dangeau*," he says in one of his most interesting essays, "and let us learn to invest it with that historic spirit which the author lacked but to which he ministers so well . . . Dangeau does not lend any wit to the things he tells, but he is so exact that sometimes they spontaneously generate it."<sup>5</sup> Were such readers commoner, we should not need to pray that such writers might be less common. Compare the smiling ease and amiability with which Sainte-Beuve writes of such authors as Voiture, or Hamilton, or Gautier, with the harsh and disdainful manner in which Brunetière or Scherer treat the butterflies and the humming-birds of literature, even when their estimates do not essentially differ from Sainte-Beuve's—except in tone. He makes us feel, what Minos and Rhadamanthus make us forget, that we are in a world set apart and dedicated to beauty and delight even in its most serious moods—the world of polite letters.

It was part of Sainte-Beuve's mission to remind an oblivious age that the great fountain-head and also the most perfect exemplars and purveyors of this unfading beauty and of this supreme delight must be sought among the ancients. Of the two antiquities, Christian and pagan, it is of the latter alone that he is a peculiarly satisfying interpreter. He recognized and reflected less and less the Hebraism that Arnold tried so hard to retain in its due place of honor. He attempted less and less to reconcile what was imperishable in it with the Hellenism which is the other half of the message of the antique world, and which he, in his turn, strove to retain in its due place of honor. As for undoing the sceptical work of the age of Voltaire and preserving something of the legacy that Voltaire rejected, most of the thinkers of the century, even

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<sup>5</sup> CL 11-12, 17.



when they made the attempt, found their efforts sterile, and ended as they had begun, in a state of spiritual bewilderment. Sainte-Beuve gave over the effort early in his career and was content, or rather resigned himself, to have no religion more substantive than his religion of letters. But this he accepted with a whole heart and to it he clung to the end, experiencing, now the joy that taste and talent derive from spirits with kindred endowments, and now the penetrating sadness of a sceptical disillusionment which literature can only beguile but cannot cure. This mingled feeling, and this purely pagan outlook as well, appear in his memorable dictum on Virgil: "Who, more than Virgil, has been a consoler to the world?"<sup>6</sup> That is the utterance of one profoundly imbued with the spirit of letters, but likewise of one who spiritually has stopped short with the pensive poet who wrote his eclogue to Pollio when the old religion had already died and the new one was still unborn. And yet how respectable is this secular and humanistic piety beside the nonchalance of a modernistic and irreverent spirit like Jules Lemaître, who fancies, or affects to fancy, that Virgil is kept alive in our day only by three lapidary phrases—two of them misunderstood so as to seem profound!

This mingled feeling is no less apparent in what Sainte-Beuve has to say of Horace—of Horace become, as he so often has, the companion and solace of perhaps worldly but not unlettered age: "I know nothing more delectable, when one grows old, and when the mind is still dainty in its pleasures though grown a little languid, than to shape one's thought thus with the aid of a book grown familiar and many a time reread; it is a way of walking supported by another, as if one leaned on a stronger arm to take a turn in the sunshine."<sup>7</sup> And elsewhere, and with a more poignant accent, he says: "In that familiar ode of Horace in which the poet enumerates all those things which we shall have to quit at the hour of death—*Linquenda tellus et domus et placens uxor*—he forgets one of the sweetest comforts, one

<sup>6</sup> PC 1-366.

<sup>7</sup> Virgile 433.

of the most durable, one of the dearest in the decline of life, that of reading Horace and the ancients: a day will come, O charming poet, when we shall read you no more!"<sup>8</sup>

The lover of Sainte-Beuve, who owes to the great critic so many enchanted hours, will, in the same pensive mood, linger over his *Causeries* with an equal poignancy of prospective regret. But let us end on a more cheerful and stirring note. In his truly upgirt and stimulating mood, not infrequently also a mood of exaltation and of lofty unction, Sainte-Beuve loves to dignify his literary creed by interweaving man's mortality with the immortality of letters:

"Not to feel the charm of letters, that, among the ancients, meant not to feel the charm of virtue, of glory, of grace, of beauty, in a word, of all that is truly divine on earth. Let such still be our device."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> PC 5-468.

<sup>9</sup> CL 15-362.

## APPENDIX

### CHRONOLOGICAL SUMMARY

- 1804 Sainte-Beuve is born at Boulogne-sur-Mer.
- 1818 Schoolboy at Paris.
- 1823-7 Medical student at Paris.
- 1824-31 Contributes critical articles to the "Globe."
- 1828 Publishes "Tableau de la Poésie française au seizième Siècle."
- 1829 "Poésies de Joseph Delorme."
- 1830 "Les Consolations".
- 1827-35 Friendship with Hugo and the Romantic group.
- 1830-40 Affiliation with Saint-Simon's socialism, with Lamennais' religious philosophy, with Carrel's republicanism, with Vinet's Protestantism, with the salon of Madame Récamier, with the Oliviers, with Ampère.  
 "Port-Royal" begun.  
 "Portraits littéraires" and "Portraits contemporains" and "Portraits de Femmes" are mainly of this decade.
- 1834 "Volupté."
- 1837 "Pensées d'Août."
- 1840-48 Librarian at the Bibliothèque Mazarine.  
 Friendship with Madame d'Arbouville.
- 1843 "Livre d'Amour".
- 1845 Enters the Academy.
- 1848-49 Lectures at Liège on Chateaubriand.
- 1849-61 "Causeries du Lundi."
- 1850 Loses his mother.
- 1852 Adheres to the Empire of Napoleon III.  
 Writes article "Les Regrets".
- 1854 Professor of Latin poetry at the Collège de France.
- 1855 His lectures on Virgil are stopped by opposition of students.
- 1857 "Etude sur Virgile".
- 1857-61 Professor at Ecole Normale.
- 1861 "Chateaubriand et son Groupe littéraire".
- 1861-69 Friendship with the Princess Mathilde, and with Taine, Renan, Gautier, and the naturalistic novelists.  
 "Nouveaux Lundis."
- 1865 Is made senator.
- 1869 Dies.



## ABBREVIATIONS USED IN NOTES

|           |                                                   |
|-----------|---------------------------------------------------|
| CL        | Causeries du Lundi                                |
| Chat.     | Chateaubriand et son Groupe littéraire            |
| Chron.    | Chroniques                                        |
| Corr.     | Correspondance                                    |
| NCorr.    | Nouvelle Correspondance                           |
| NL        | Nouveaux Lundis                                   |
| Olivier   | Lettres aux Olivier                               |
| PC        | Portraits contemporains                           |
| FF        | Portraits de Femmes                               |
| PL        | Portraits littéraires                             |
| PR        | Port-Royal                                        |
| Prem. L   | Premiers Lundis                                   |
| Princesse | Lettres à la Princesse                            |
| Tableau   | Tableau de la Poésie française au seizième Siècle |
| Virgile   | Etude sur Virgile                                 |
| Vol.      | Volupté                                           |



